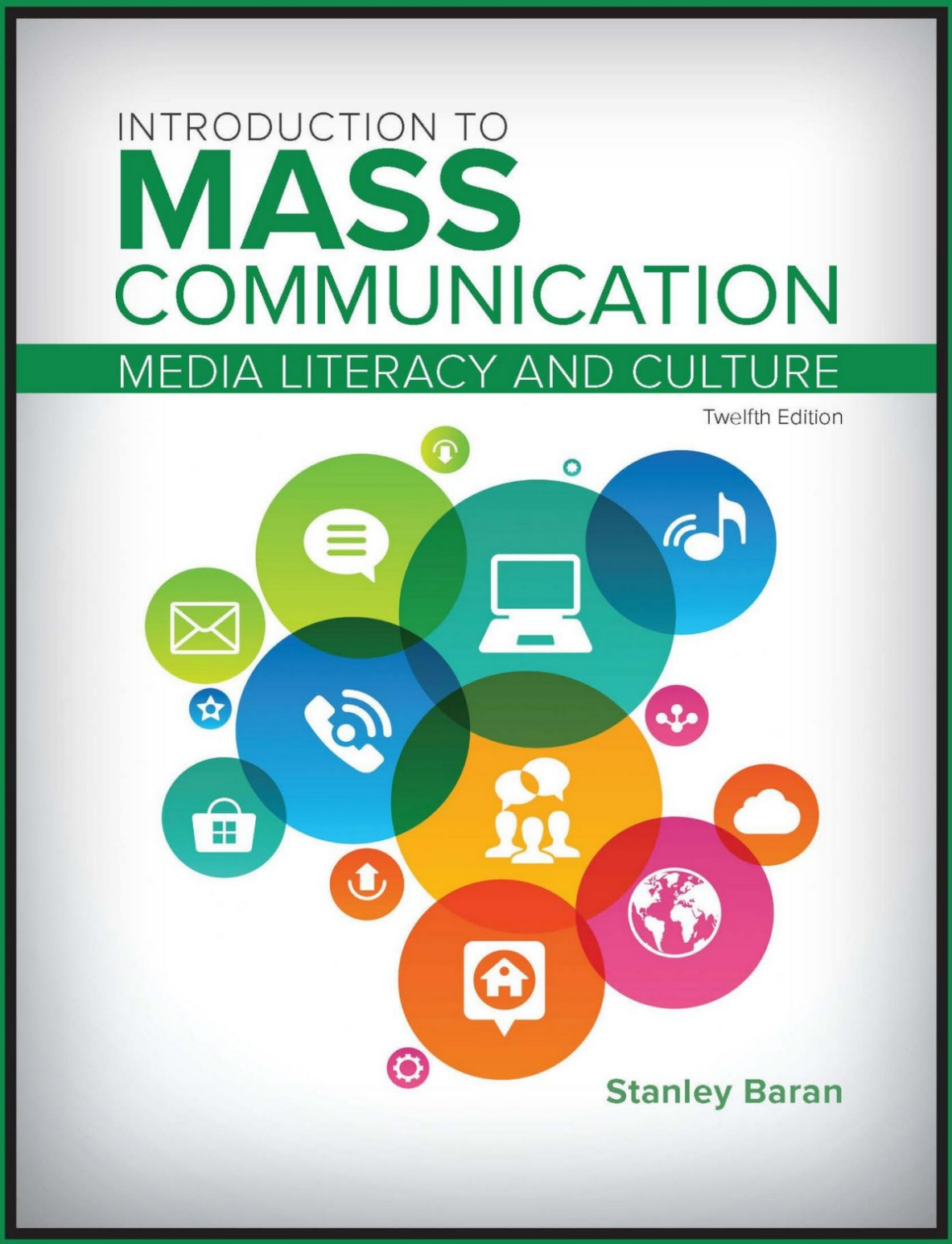
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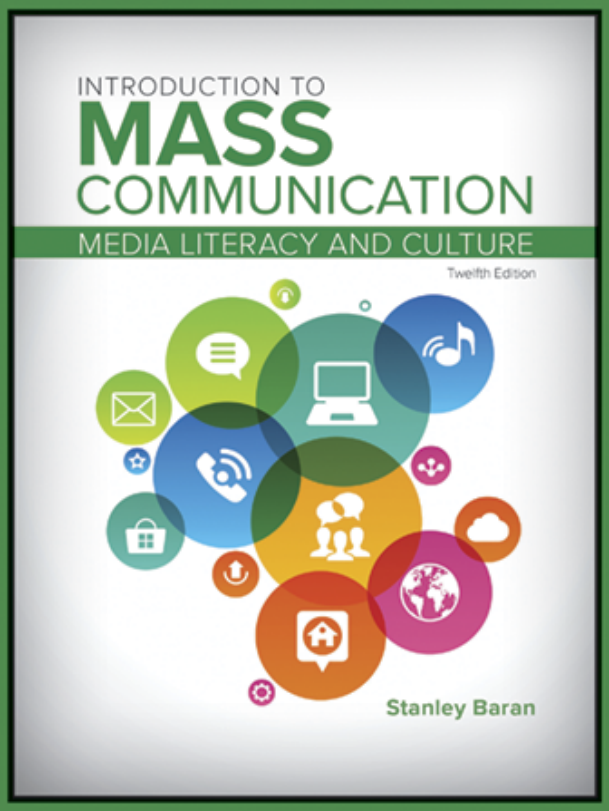
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Introduction to Mass Communication

MEDIA LITERACY AND CULTURE

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SCOM 2050

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Twelfth Edition

Introduction to Mass Communication

MEDIA LITERACY AND CULTURE

Introduction to the Custom Textbook for SCOM 2050

About this Book

The book you are reading has been specifically designed for the course you are taking. It is based on a pre-existing book by Stanley J. Baran called *Introduction to Mass Communication: Media Literacy and Culture.* Baran's book is an excellent introduction to most of the important topics we're going to cover in this course, and the vast majority of our book is composed of his chapters. However, our goal is to provide you with a textbook that precisely tracks with the unique content of this course. As a result, there are two ways in which this book departs from Baran. First, we have provided a separate introduction for each of Baran's chapters. We will discuss the function of those introductions below. Second, we have contributed five original chapters to this book—deeper dives into subjects we think are particularly important for modern media literacy.

The purpose of this introduction is primarily to help you understand how to use this book—to explain its structure, and to draw your attention to the unique features we have included for your convenience and your edification. However, before we begin it is important to give you a short introduction to the class itself.

Themes of this Chapter: The 4 Reasons This Class Exists

At its heart, this is a media literacy class. As communication scholars and teachers, we think it is vitally important to teach this kind of class. However, not everyone does what we do, so we thought it would be helpful to explain the reasons this class exists. This isn't merely a justification for the existence of the course, it's also a sort of roadmap for the entire course. These are the themes we will come back to over and over, and clarifying them at the beginning of the class will make it easier to understand why we have structured the book the way we have.

REASON #1: MASS MEDIA CONTENT IS EVERYWHERE

As you'll learn in the first chapter of the book, as a culture we consume an enormous amount of mass media. There has never been a time in the history of the world when a population as large as ours has had easy access to so many different ways to consume media, and our options are only increasing. And this ease of access to media, along with the increasing number of media options, are having an impact on our consumption patterns. Collectively, we are thoroughly taking advantage of this unprecedented wealth of media riches. More and more hours of our days are being spent watching, reading, listening to, and experiencing media content. With advertising and the increasing presence of digital screens in public places, not only are we being exposed to more mass media content, we are almost unable to avoid it.



▼ Business team with business world , connected

idea Ink Design/Shutterstock

REASON #2: MASS MEDIA SHAPE OUR REALITY

Though we tend not to think about it this way, almost everything we know about the world around us is either influenced by mass media or directly taught to us through our interaction with media. What does the larger world look like? What are countries we have never been to like? How do people we've never met act? What is going on in the parts of our own culture that we don't often participate in? To the extent that we believe we know the answer to these questions, it is because of our interaction with mass media. One of the most common experiences people have when traveling somewhere new, for example, is a sense of surprise—the feeling that the place they've traveled to is not like what they expected. Why did they have expectations in the first place? The answer is almost always media. And our own culture is profoundly influenced by and sometimes even completely composed of media artifacts. Mass media entertain us, inform us, sell things to us, and show us how to do things. In very real ways, mass media determines how we see the world.

REASON #3: WE ARE RELATIVELY IGNORANT ABOUT MASS MEDIA

Despite the far-reaching influence of media on us and the nearly ubiquitous presence of mass media in our lives, very few of us have much knowledge about it. This is not a criticism of us as people—it is a reflection of what we prioritize in our educational system. We spend many long years teaching young people to analyze literature, for example, but we hardly spend even a few months teaching them how to understand and analyze mass media. And while Shakespeare is unquestionably more important to our culture and our history than, say, *NCIS* or *The Voice*, vastly more people watch those two shows than will ever actually read Shakespeare's writing outside of school. There is a good argument to be made that our unwillingness to read Shakespeare voluntarily is exactly why it should be required in schools, but it is also true that we ought to be teaching students more about the media they do consume on a daily basis. Thus, the book you are reading and the course you are taking.

REASON #4: MEDIA LITERACY IS REQUIRED FOR FULL PARTICIPATION IN OUR SOCIETY

Mass media do not just provide us with entertainment, they also provide services that have been recognized as vital to our society since before our country was even formed. There is a reason the First Amendment to the Constitution includes freedom of the press. We need to be well informed about current events in order to participate in government and other civic activities, but we also need to be informed about our own culture in order to be good citizens in other ways. We need to understand how media work, how they function economically, and how they interact with each other and other aspects of our society. Only then can we make intelligent and responsible decisions about what media to consume, how to interpret what we see and hear, and how to advise the other people in our lives. In fact, media awareness and literacy is increasingly becoming important to understand the language of our culture.

The Focus on Critical Thinking in this Book

When we talk about this course in the Communication Department at Georgia State University, the shorthand we use for it is "our media literacy course." As you will discover in greater depth in **Chapter 1**, media literacy is a complicated idea that contains many different components, so even our abbreviated understanding of the nature of this course is fairly complex. However, the first characteristic of media literacy is that it is a critical thinking skill. The overarching purpose of the course is to help you become more media literate, and a big part of that is helping you develop better critical thinking skills regarding media. To that end, each chapter will contain a "Focus on Critical Thinking" section near the beginning. These sections will explore individual issues related to each chapter from a critical standpoint.



▼ Grand Rapids, Michigan, May 30, 2020: Thousands gathered in downtown Grand Rapids to protest police brutality and the death of George Floyd. Date Taken : 20200530

Ayman Haykal/Alamy Stock Photo

It's easy to think that "critical" means negative, but when it comes to critical thinking, the idea is to be curious, openminded, reflective, and questioning. Many of the media issues we'll be exploring in our "Focus on Critical Thinking" sections deal with questions that many of us might already think we know the answer to. Discovering that the truth is different than we thought, or that some questions are more complicated than they seem, isn't a negative experience. It's part of the process of learning, and that is ultimately the goal of the book: not only to teach you about mass media, but to encourage you to be more curious about media issues, and to inspire you to continue to learn more about them. The critical thinking sections of each

chapter are intended to model that process, as well as to inform you about some particularly interesting and surprising mass media issues.

How to Use this Book

Chapter Introductions

Each of the chapters in this book written by Baran start with an introduction that we have created. These introductions serve three purposes: to introduce the topic of the chapter, to provide critical additional information we think needs to be included, and to give you a preliminary study guide for the chapter.

Chapter Overviews

Each chapter starts with an overview that introduces the subject and sometimes provides new material not contained in the rest of the chapter. There is also always a section called “What to Focus On” whose purpose is to help you read the chapter more effectively.

Introductory Information

Chapter introductions generally contain additional information we feel needs to be included. This could range from just a few paragraphs that provide supplementary ideas or explanations to a much larger section that includes a great deal of information not supplied in the rest of the chapter. However long this section is, all the information provided by it is important to the course and should be given as much attention as the content in the Baran chapters themselves.

Chapter Study Guides

The chapter introductions (and all the original chapters) conclude with a study guide to help you prepare for quizzes, tests, and other assignments. These study guides are designed to be helpful, but are not necessarily the only thing you'll need to use for the course. Your instructor may provide a different kind of guide, or may give you additional terms and questions to study. Please remember that while this book is crucial to the subject matter of the course, it is ultimately the information in your instructor's lectures and other forms of communication that should guide how you study for the class.

Each guide includes the following sections:

KEY WORDS:

This section provides a list of the most important terms in the chapter (and in the introduction, if it includes additional information). Make sure you know the definition of these terms, as well as their importance. If a key term is about an event, make sure you know the date(s) of that event.

IMPORTANT PEOPLE:

This section provides a list of the most important people in the chapter and the introduction. Make sure you know who these people are, why they are important, and any relevant dates or time periods associated with them.

QUESTIONS YOU SHOULD BE ABLE TO ANSWER:

This section provides a list of questions to help guide you in determining what specific information and broader ideas you're supposed to get from the chapter.



▼ Three students working on computer and discussing their work, young man leaning over to look at the screen

JohnnyGreig/Getty Images

Introduction to Chapter 1

About This Chapter

In this class, we often refer to the first chapter as "Thinking Critically About Mass Media: Definitions." The reason for that is because this chapter serves as an introduction to the kind of thinking we're encouraging you to do this semester, and it begins by talking about what various important words mean.

That seems kind of boring, right? I mean, who wants to talk about words and definitions?

You do.

If you want to become a better informed and more critical consumer of media, less vulnerable to manipulation by corporations, advertisers, media writers and executives, and political advocates, then you need to pay attention to definitions. How we define things structures our lives in powerful ways that we don't always think about until it's too late. What does it mean when your parents tell you to come home early? When someone says they love you? When a medication says it's the most powerful one available? The answers to these questions can impact your life significantly. It's not just important to know what *you* think these words mean, it's vital for you to understand what *others* think they mean. That's what this first chapter is about.

This chapter is about explaining what things mean in the context of the class and narrowing down our field of study to something manageable. The name of this course is "Media, Culture & Society," after all. Depending on how you define those terms, this is either a class about media literacy or it's a class about literally about everything in the world. Your instructor could start out the first day by talking about how to make an omelet or the history of hats in France, and that would all be covered by the course because those things happen in society, in culture. We won't be doing that. You're welcome. Instead, we're giving you this chapter, along with the rest of this introduction, as a way of providing focus and context to the course.

WHAT TO FOCUS ON

Unsurprisingly, given that overview, you should focus on the definitions in this chapter, and on the parts of the chapter that are trying to explain the key terms of the book. So, for example, it is more important for you to understand what culture means and what it includes than the specific cultural dynamics the chapter describes. However, you do need to pay attention to the interactions between mass communication and culture. You'll see all this reflected in the study guide at the end of this introduction.

You should also focus on the information in the chapter about the scope and nature of mass media. This chapter is a primary place to learn about the media *as a whole*—how they are structured and what their presence in our lives is like.

Finally, pay close attention to the media literacy section of the chapter. This is a media literacy class, in many ways, so what you read in that section will have a lot to do with the rest of the material in the class.

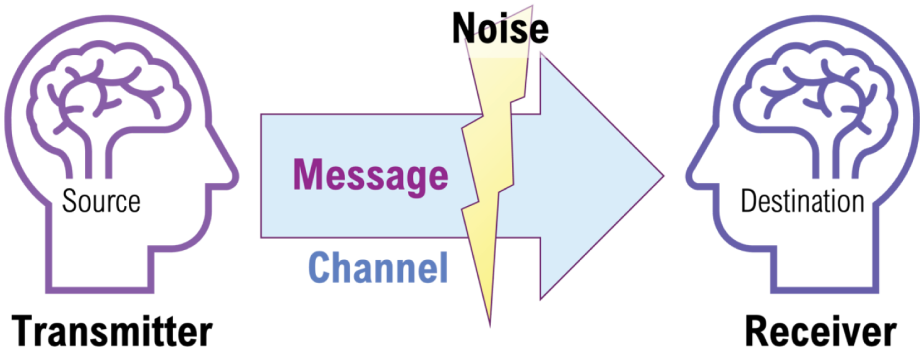
Introductory Information About Communication, Culture, and Media Literacy

Focus on Critical Thinking: Why Does Everyone Teach That Same Model of Communication?

"Communication" is the most important term we'll use in this class, but it's also probably the hardest to define. The first chapter you're about to read provides one clear definition, but to understand why that definition is important we'll have to talk about the definitions that *aren't* in the chapter and why we chose to focus on the one that is.

People have been talking and arguing about communication for well over 2,000 years.[1] It wasn't until relatively recently, though, that those arguments began to center around how we study communication academically. And, of course, we didn't have much reason to argue about electronic communication until the 1900s, when broadcast media became both feasible and popular. As radio, film, and eventually television became features of modern life, many communication researchers and experts developed an interest in defining and explaining communication in a comprehensive way.[2] Though different writers approached this question in their own unique ways, one particular understanding of communication emerged during this period that became very popular, especially among communication teachers.

In the 1940s, American mathematician **Claude Shannon** had been working on issues of cryptography and how data and signals get processed electronically. He wrote a paper, published in 1948, describing "A Mathematical Theory of Communication."[3] In that paper, Shannon declared that the "fundamental problem of communication is that of reproducing at one point either exactly or approximately a message selected at another point."[4] Previous authors had envisioned communication as a process whereby messages are sent from a sender to a receiver, but Shannon described a more complex model that took into consideration the problems of the electronic age. In 1949, he and **Warren Weaver**, another American mathematician who had become an important administrator at the Rockefeller Foundation, published a book together that described what they called **The Mathematical Model of Communication**. This model is also known as "The Shannon-Weaver Model" and "The Transmission Model of Communication."



The Mathematical Model of Communication contends that communication can be described as a system with certain basic parts. The **source** is the person or organization that generates and/or selects the message. The **message** is the information that the source wants to send. The **transmitter** is the method by which the message is translated into data and then sent, such as the way your brain translates ideas into the complex series of bodily actions that are required for you to make vocal sounds when you're having a face-to-face oral conversation with another person. We would simplify that complex phenomenon by saying that your mouth is the transmitter in a face-to-face conversation, or that your phone is the transmitter when you're texting someone. The **channel** is the path the messages takes from sender to receiver, such as the air between two people in a direct conversation or the Internet in a texting interaction. The **receiver** literally receives the message and translates it back into information that can be understood by the **destination**, which is the term for the people who are the intended recipients of the message. So your ears are the receiver in a direct verbal conversation, and your phone is the receiver in a text conversation. Shannon's model also includes a seventh element: **noise** in the channel that might interfere with transmission or distort the message.

Shannon's work soon gained widespread popularity, in large part because of Weaver's introduction to the book. That introduction was written primarily for those with little or no background in electronic science or information processing, and it was intended to make Shannon's electronically based model applicable to a much broader audience. In that introduction, Weaver defined communication as "all of the procedures by which one mind may affect another."[5] If that sounds like a really broad definition, that is exactly what Weaver intended. He argued that communication included "not only written and oral speech, but also music, the pictorial arts, the theatre, the ballet, and in fact all human behavior."[6] In essence, Weaver was suggesting that Shannon's mathematical understanding of electronic communication should be applied to all forms of communicative human behavior.

Many social scientists were happy to accept Weaver's argument, and The Mathematical Model of Communication became a standard part of teaching communication in the United States and beyond. In fact, as noted communication scholar John Fiske has contended, the model "is widely accepted as one of the main seeds out of which Communication Studies has grown."[7] If you've ever taken a basic communication course or even a public speaking class, it's likely you've studied this model in some form. In this class, however, when we talk about "communication" and even "mass communication," we won't be relying on The Mathematical Model. That is because this model, while historically influential and unquestionably useful within the specific context of electronic transmission science, isn't a very good way to think about human communication as a general process—and it is a particularly bad way to think about communication as it relates to media, culture, and society.

Perhaps the biggest problem with The Mathematical Model of Communication is that Shannon did not originally conceive it as a something that would describe the fullness of human communicative behavior. It was specifically formulated to describe the way data—any data of any kind—moves from one point in an electronic system to another. What it was not designed to do was consider what that data means or how it interacts with the larger culture or society. Shannon himself said that the meaning of any message would be "irrelevant to the engineering problem" his model aims to address.[8] Many critics have argued that removing the idea of meaning from a model of communication renders that model inaccurate when it is applied outside electronic systems. Nimrod Bar-Am, an Israeli scholar of communication philosophy, points out that Shannon's model denies the importance of the social contexts and systems which are a necessary precondition for everyday communication to occur in the first place.[9] In other words, the argument that we can treat all human communication the same way

we treat the abstract idea of electronic data is not only "groundless but also expressive of a basic lack of understanding regarding the unique nature of communication."[10] Daniel Chandler, a British semiotics scholar, goes even further, calling The Mathematical Model "not merely a gross over-simplification but a dangerously misleading misrepresentation of the nature of human communication."[11]

Defining Communication and Other Key Terms

Fortunately, models like Shannon's are not the only way scholars have come up with to describe communication. Fiske notes that there have been two "schools" in the study of communication. The first—represented by Shannon's model—sees communication as the transmission of messages. The second school, however, "is concerned with how messages, or texts, interact with people in order to produce meanings; that is, it is concerned with the role of texts in our culture."[12] It is from this second school of study that we will be taking the definition of communication that we'll use in this book. There are still references in this semester's readings to transmitters, receivers, channels, and noise, but most of those refer to the engineering systems that make electronic data transfer possible.

The definition of communication we'll use for this book comes from scholar James W. Carey, whose influential work on theories of communication spanned over four decades. In the 1970s, Carey published an extensive critique of the dominance of the Mathematical Model of communication. He connected the popularity of Shannon and Weaver's model with the modern, industrial perception of communication as a neutral technology that serves to extend human control over the world. Carey argued that there is a much older understanding of communication—an alternative to the technological understanding that had become so popular. He referred to this as a "ritual" view of communication. The ritual perspective sees communication as something that draws people together "in fellowship and commonality,"[13] rather than something that serves to control the world. Carey argued that **communication** should be defined as "a symbolic process whereby reality is produced, maintained, repaired, and transformed,"[14] and that is the definition we'll use. This understanding of communication best matches the incredibly complex world of mass media in which we find ourselves, and seeing communication as a messy symbolic process rather than a sleek system of control can help us better navigate that world. Throughout this semester, you'll encounter many examples of the ways in which communication draws people together in fellowship. Mass communication is the modern key to the production, maintenance, and transformation of the many cultures and subcultures to which we all belong, just as one major example. You'll also find that communication is more than just the technology of mass communication, and that the extension of media's scope and reach has not always been accompanied by greater control—at least, not in the sense of something uniformly beneficial to the people who consume it. Communication is both complicated and influential, which is why it's something worth studying in the first place.

There are two additional terms that need to be discussed. For most of the history of communications studies, the term "mass communication" was almost synonymous with "mass media." In other words, when we talked about mass communication, we necessarily meant something that originated with big media structures like newspapers and television networks. After all, the only way for communication to impact large numbers of people was for it to be distributed using one of the traditional kinds of media, and those media were economically restricted to big organizations that could afford to distribute a

movie or print a magazine or build a radio station. As communication and media scholar Richard Perloff points out, however, "[n]owadays a message can be transmitted to a large audience by an individual, not via a complex organization."[15] Admittedly there are usually organizations of some kind involved in social media and other kinds of individual-to-mass communication, but YouTube, for example, doesn't operate in the same way as a broadcast television station, nor does it create the same obstacles to communication by individuals. The point is simply that traditional media are no longer the only mechanisms by which communication gets disseminated to mass audiences.

Drawing on and adapting Perloff's work, then, we will define "mass media," "mass communication," and "mediated communication" separately. **Mass media** are organizations that use technological channels of distributing messages with the purpose of creating and maintaining audiences. **Mass communication** is communication to a large audience that occurs via the dissemination of messages by mass media. Finally, **mediated communication** is communication in which messages are conveyed via a specific technological medium.[16] So, to summarize, mass media are media organizations, mass communication is disseminated by those organizations, and mediated communication is any kind of communication that is technologically conveyed—regardless of how it is disseminated or whether it is intended for mass audiences. If I were to send a message to a single person via text, that's mediated communication even though it's just a one-on-one interaction. But let's imagine that the person who receives my text decides to forward it to a friend of theirs who is a reporter. If that reporter writes an article about my text, and if that article is distributed by a media organization like *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, then that article is mass communication.

There's one more thing about the word "media" that's worth mentioning here at the beginning of the book. This is for those of you who, like me, focus on the specifics of language. It's important to remember that the word "media" is the plural form of the word "medium." That can make things sound a bit odd when we're talking about "the media" or "mass media" in general. When I say "the media" then I'll treat it as a singular thing. So, I'll say something like "the media *is* biased toward capitalism" because I'm talking about the news media as a single, whole entity. But when I used the word "media" in other circumstances, I might be talking about multiple organizations, and when that happens I will treat "media" as a plural noun. I might say "the mass media *are* prone to vertical integration" because I'm talking about the various different entities that do business in the media sphere. All this can be very confusing, but all you have to remember is that sometimes "media" means a single group and other times "media" means a bunch of individual organizations.

A Note About Gutenberg

It's difficult to begin talking about mass media and mass communication without referencing Johannes Gutenberg, the German metallurgist whose work on printing systems in the 1400s helped make books commonplace in Europe. We will start talking about his influence later in this chapter, but we won't really delve into his story with any depth until **Chapter 3**. Just remember that Gutenberg is one of those historical figures about whom we should be thinking much more critically than we typically do.

What to Study

KEY WORDS

The Mathematical Model of Communication

Source, transmitter, message, channel, receiver, destination, noise

Communication

Mass Media

Mass Communication

Mediated Communication

Technological Determinism

Culture

Media Literacy

Third-Person Effect

Hostile Media Effect

IMPORTANT PEOPLE

Claude Shannon

Warren Weaver

James W. Carey

QUESTIONS YOU SHOULD BE ABLE TO ANSWER

- What is The Mathematical Model of communication, what is its origin, and what are its 7 elements?
- Why are we using a cultural definition of communication instead of The Mathematical Model?
- What does it mean to say that culture is learned, and what does this have to do with communication?
- Why are the stories told by mass media important?
- What are an audience's responsibilities as the audience for mass media stories?
- What is the general scope of mass media's presence in our lives, and what are the trends of that presence?

- What prompted the development of a mass audience for media? By what historical period had both a mass audience and the means to reach it arrived?
- What are the 8 characteristics of media literacy?

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Mass Communication, Culture, and Media Literacy

1



We touch the world, and the world touches us, through mass communication.

Elnur/Shutterstock

c 600 Wooden block printing press invented in China

c 1000 The Chinese develop movable clay type

c 1200 Simple movable metal printing press invented in Korea

1400

1446 Gutenberg printing press perfected

1456 ▶ First Gutenberg Bible printed



North Wind Picture Archives/Alamy Stock Photo

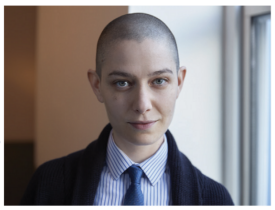
1800

1800s Availability of printed materials spreads knowledge that leads to the Industrial Revolution; the Industrial Revolution leads to the creation of the first mass audiences

1830s Publishers begin selling newspapers for a penny and profitting from ad sales, selling readers rather than papers

1900

1962 Marshall McLuhan publishes *The Gutenberg Galaxy* and argues the advent of print is the key to modern consciousness



Showtime Networks/Photofest

2000

2008 Art Silverblatt identifies elements of media literacy

2013 Term "binge viewing" enters mainstream use

2016 Annual global Internet traffic passed the zettabyte threshold

2017 ▶ First gender non-binary character on American TV appears in *Billions*

2020 ▶ Coronavirus in the US; anti-Asian discrimination rises; controversy over racist brand imagery.



John Angelillo/UPI/Alamy Stock Photo

YOUR SMARTPHONE'S RADIO ALARM SINGS YOU AWAKE.

It's Lil Naz X, the last few lyrics of "Old Town Road." The upbeat DJ shouts at you that it's 7:41 and you'd better get going. But before you do, she adds, listen to a few words from your friends at Best Buy electronics, home of fast, friendly, courteous service—"Expert Service. Unbeatable Price!"

Before you get up, though, you take a quick pass at Facebook and Instagram. But you have to get going now. In the living room, you find your roommate has left the television on. You stop for a moment and listen: Interest rates are rising, which may affect the availability of student loans; several states are considering providing free high-speed Internet to all students to improve their access to the digital world; a massive storm, not yet a hurricane, is working its way up the coast; and you deserve a break today at McDonald's. As you head toward the bathroom, your bare feet slip on some magazines littering the floor—*Wired, Fast Company, People.* You need to talk to your roommate about cleaning up!

After showering, you quickly pull on your Levi's, lace up your Nike cross-trainers, and throw on an Under Armour jacket. No time for breakfast; you grab a Nature Valley granola bar and your tablet and head for the bus stop. As the bus rolls up, you can't help but notice the giant ad on its side: another *Marvel* movie. Rejecting that as a film choice for the weekend, you sit down next to a teenager listening to music on his

Beats headphones and playing *Words With Friends*. You fire up your tablet and busy yourself with a few quick TikTok videos, raucous Twitter celebrity feuds, and your favorite news app, scanning the lead stories and the local news, then checking out *Zits* and *Garfield.*

Hopping off the bus at the campus stop, you run into your friend Chris. You walk to class together, talking about last night's *Walking Dead* episode. It's not yet 9:00, and already you're involved in mass communication. In fact, like 80% of smartphone owners, you're involved with media first thing in the morning, checking your device even before brushing your teeth (**Pinkham, 2020**), or perhaps like two-thirds of all American adults, you've even slept with your technological best friend (**Doby, 2020**).

What Is Culture?

Culture is the learned behavior of members of a given social group. Many writers and thinkers have offered interesting expansions of this definition. Here are four examples, all from anthropologists. These definitions highlight not only what culture *is* but also what culture *does*:

- Culture is the learned, socially acquired traditions and lifestyles of the members of a society, including their patterned, repetitive ways of thinking, feeling, and acting. (**Harris, 1983**, p. 5)
- Culture lends significance to human experience by selecting from and organizing it. It refers broadly to the forms through which people make sense of their lives, rather than more narrowly to the opera or art of museums. (**Rosaldo, 1989**, p. 26)
- Culture is the medium evolved by humans to survive. Nothing is free from cultural influences. It is the keystone in civilization's arch and is the medium through which all of life's events must flow. We are culture. (**Hall, 1976**, p. 14)
- Culture is an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbolic forms by means of which [people] communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life. (Geertz, as cited in **Taylor, 1991**, p. 91)

Culture as Socially Constructed Shared Meaning

Virtually all definitions of culture recognize that culture is *learned.* Recall the opening vignette. Even if this scenario does not exactly match your early mornings, you probably recognize its elements. Moreover, all of us are familiar with most, if not every, cultural reference in it. *Transformers*, *The Walking Dead*, McDonald's, Under Armour, TikTok—all are points of reference, things that have some meaning for all of us. How did this come to be?

Creation and maintenance of a more or less common culture occur through communication, including mass communication. When we talk to our friends, when a parent raises a child, when religious leaders instruct their followers, when teachers teach, when grandparents pass on recipes, when politicians campaign, and when media professionals produce content that we read, listen to, or watch, meaning is being shared and culture is being constructed and maintained.

Functions and Effects of Culture

Culture serves a purpose. It helps us categorize and classify our experiences; it helps define us, our world, and our place in it. In doing so, culture can have a number of sometimes conflicting effects.

LIMITING AND LIBERATING EFFECTS OF CULTURE



▲ These images have meaning for all of us—meaning that is socially constructed through communication in our culture. How many can you recognize? What specific meaning or meanings does each have for you? How did you develop each meaning? How closely do you think your meanings match those of your friends? Of your parents? What value is there—if any—in having shared meaning for these things in our everyday lives?

(top left) Fadziel Nor/Shutterstock; (top right) John Flournoy/McGraw Hill; (bottom left) Kevin Dietsch/UPI/Alamy Stock Photo; (bottom right) Rokas Tenys/Alamy Stock Photo

A culture's learned traditions and values can be seen as patterned, repetitive ways of thinking, feeling, and acting. Culture limits our options and provides useful guidelines for behavior. For example, when conversing, you do not consciously consider, "Now, how far away should I stand? Am I too close?" You simply stand where you stand. After a hearty meal with a friend's family, you do not engage in mental self-debate, "Should I burp? Yes! No! Arghhhh. . . ." Culture provides information that helps us make meaningful distinctions about right and wrong, appropriate and inappropriate, good and bad, attractive and unattractive, and so on. How does it do this?

Obviously, it does so through communication. Through a lifetime of communication, we have learned just what our culture expects of us. The two examples given here are positive results of culture's limiting effects. But culture's limiting effects can be negative, such as when we are unwilling or unable to move past patterned, repetitive ways of thinking, feeling, and acting or when we entrust our "learning" to teachers whose interests are selfish, narrow, or otherwise inconsistent with our own.

US culture, for example, values thinness and beauty in women. How many women endure weeks of unhealthy diets and succumb to potentially dangerous surgical procedures in search of a body that for most is physically unattainable? How many women are judged by the men and other women around them for not conforming to our culture's standards of thinness and beauty? Why does an expression like "fat shaming" exist in our language? Why are 50% of preadolescent girls and 30% of preadolescent boys unhappy with their bodies (**Muhlheim, 2020**)? Why do over one-half of teenage girls and nearly

one-third of teenage boys use unhealthy weight control behaviors like skipping meals, fasting, smoking cigarettes, vomiting, and taking laxatives (National Eating Disorders Association, 2020)?

Now consider how this situation may have come about. Our parents did not bounce us on their knees when we were babies, telling us that thin was good and heavy was bad. Think back, though, to the stories you were told and the television shows and movies you watched growing up. The heroines (or, more often, the beautiful love interests of the heroes) were invariably tall, beautiful, and thin. The bad guys were usually mean and fat. From Disney's depictions of Snow White, Cinderella, Belle, Jasmine, and Pocahontas to the impossible dimensions of most video-game and comic book heroines, the message is embedded in the conscious (and unconscious) mind of every girl and boy: You can't be too thin or too beautiful! As it is, 69% of women and 65% of girls cite constant pressure from advertising and media to reach unrealistic standards of beauty as a major factor fueling their anxiety about their appearance (**Dove, 2020**). And it does not help that these messages are routinely reinforced throughout the culture—for example, in the recent explosion of plastic surgery game apps that let kids give perfect nose jobs and face-lifts, all with brightly colored graphics (**Yan, 2018**); the popularity of Instagram's plastic surgery filters— a billion applications in 2019 alone, leading the company to ban them from its platform (**Marikar, 2019**); and the now-routine "sexy fill-in-the-blank" women's Halloween costumes (**Lake, Macedo, & Riegle, 2019**).

This message and millions of others come to us primarily through the media, and although the people who produce these media images are not necessarily selfish or mean, their motives are undeniably financial. Their contribution to our culture's repetitive ways of thinking, feeling, and acting is most certainly not primary among their concerns when preparing their communication.

Culture need not only limit. The fact that media representations of female beauty often meet with debate and disagreement points out that culture can be liberating as well. This is so because cultural values can be *contested.* In fact, today, we're just as likely to see strong, intelligent female characters who save the day, such as *Brave*'s Merida, *Mulan*'s Fa Mulan, *Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs*'s Sam Sparks, and *Frozen*'s sisters, Anna and Elsa, as we are movie princesses who need to be saved by the hero.

Especially in a pluralistic, democratic society such as ours, the **dominant culture** (or **mainstream culture**)—the one that seems to hold sway with the majority of people—is often openly challenged. People do meet, find attractive, like, and love people who do not fit the standard image of beauty. In addition, media sometimes present images that suggest different ideals of beauty and success. Actors Katy Mixon, Issa Rae, Dascha Polanco, and Mindy Kaling; singer/actor Beyoncé; and comedians Riki Lindhome and Amy Schumer all represent alternatives to our culture's idealized standards of beauty, and all have undeniable appeal (and power) on the big and small screens. Liberation from the limitations imposed by culture resides in our ability and willingness to learn and use *new* patterned, repetitive ways of thinking, feeling, and acting; to challenge existing patterns; and to create our own.



▲ Culture can be contested. Actor Asia Kate Dillon plays Taylor Mason in the hit Showtime series *Billions*. They (Dillon's preferred self-referencing pronoun) identify as non-binary, in stark contrast to the actors typically chosen for prime roles on big-budget TV shows. Dillon's role on *Billions* is the first gender non-binary main character on North American television and challenges the culture's everyday assumption of what a TV star should be and look like, as you can clearly see when looking at the casts of other video fare such as those of *Riverdale*, *NCIS*, and *Chicago Fire*.

Showtime Networks/Photofest

DEFINING, DIFFERENTIATING, DIVIDING, AND UNITING EFFECTS OF CULTURE

Have you ever made the mistake of calling a dolphin, porpoise, or even a whale a fish? Maybe you have heard others do it. This error occurs because when we think of fish, we think "lives in the water" and "swims." Fish are defined by their "aquatic culture." Because water-residing, swimming dolphins, porpoises, and whales share that culture, we sometimes forget that they are mammals, not fish.

We, too, are defined by our culture. We are citizens of the United States; we are Americans. If we travel to other countries, we will hear ourselves labeled "American," and this label will conjure up stereotypes and expectations in the minds of those who use and hear it. The stereotype, whatever it may be, will probably fit us only incompletely, or perhaps hardly at all—perhaps we are dolphins in a sea full of fish. Nevertheless, being American defines us in innumerable important ways, both to others (more obviously) and to ourselves (less obviously).

Within this large, national culture, however, there are many smaller, **bounded cultures** (or **co-cultures**). For example, we speak comfortably of Italian neighborhoods, fraternity row, the South, and the suburbs. Because of our cultural understanding of these categories, each expression communicates something about our expectations of these places. We think we can predict with a good deal of certainty the types of restaurants and shops we will find in the Italian neighborhood, even the kind of music we will hear escaping from open windows. We can predict the kinds of clothes and cars we will see on fraternity row, the likely behavior of shop clerks in the South, and the political orientation of

the suburbs' residents. Moreover, the people within these cultures usually identify themselves as members of those bounded cultures. An individual may say, for example, "I'm Italian American" or "I'm a Southerner." These smaller cultures unite groups of people and enable them to see themselves as different from other groups around them. Thus, culture also serves to differentiate us from others.

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▲ *Riverdale*, *NCIS*, and *Chicago Fire*—these three television programs are aimed at different audiences, yet in each, the characters share certain traits that mark them as attractive. Must people in real life look like these performers to be considered attractive? Successful? Good? The people shown are all slender, tall, and attractive. Yes, they are just make-believe television characters, but the producers of the shows on which they appear chose these people—as opposed to others—for a reason. What do you think it was? How well do you measure up to the cultural standard of beauty and attractiveness represented here? Do you ever wish that you could be just a bit more like these people? Why or why not?

(top) The CW Television Network/Photofest; (bottom left) Kevin Lynch/CBS/Getty Images; (bottom right) NBC/Photofest

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In the United States, we generally consider this a good thing. We pride ourselves on our pluralism, on our diversity, and on the richness of the cultural heritages represented within our borders. We enjoy moving from one bounded culture to another or from a bounded culture to the dominant national culture and back again.

Problems arise, however, when differentiation leads to division. All Americans suffered the painful personal, financial, and physical effects of the coronavirus pandemic of 2020. But that ongoing tragedy was compounded for the millions of Asian Americans whose "Americanness" was challenged simply because of their perceived cultural connection to the people of Wuhan, China, where the disease originated. Before the virus struck the United States, anti-Asian hate crimes had been on a two-decade decline (**Feinberg, 2020**). But 4 months into the country's battle against the disease's physical and economic toll, the Asian Pacific Policy and Planning Council had received more than 1,800 reports of harassment or violence against Asian Americans in 45 states and Washington, D.C. (**Kambhampaty, 2020**), and by the end of that year, there were 2,808 *reported* "hate incidents" nationwide aimed at Asian Americans (**Nakamura, 2021**). Asian Americans' looks, names, and sometimes facility with a "strange-sounding" language somehow communicated otherness, not-American, to many of their fellow citizens. Just as culture is constructed and maintained through communication, it is also communication (or miscommunication) that turns differentiation into division.

Yet Americans of all colors, ethnicities, genders, nationalities, places of birth, economic strata, and intelligence levels often get along; in fact, we *can* communicate, *can* prosper, and *can* respect one another's differences. Culture can divide us, but culture also unites us. Our culture represents our collective experience. We converse easily with strangers because we share the same culture. We automatically know when a handshake is appropriate, use titles or first or last names appropriately, know how much to say, and know how much to leave unsaid. Through communication with people in our culture, we internalize cultural norms and values—those things that bind our many diverse bounded cultures into a functioning, cohesive society.

From this discussion comes the definition of culture on which the remainder of this book is based: Culture is the world made meaningful; it is socially constructed and maintained through communication. It limits as well as liberates us; it differentiates as well as unites us. It defines our realities and thereby shapes the ways we think, feel, and act.



There is nothing about these Asian American people that should “communicate otherness” in the United States, yet too many people cannot see beyond their own bounded cultures.

Ron Adar/Alamy Stock Photo

Mass Communication and Culture

Despite the fact that culture can limit and divide, it can also liberate and unite. As such, it offers us infinite opportunities to use communication for good—if we choose to do so. James **Carey (1975)** wrote:

> Because we have looked at each new advance in communication technology as opportunities for politics and economics, we have devoted them, almost exclusively, to government and trade. We have rarely seen them as opportunities to expand [our] powers to learn and exchange ideas and experience. (pp. 20–21)

Who are "we" in this quote? *We* are the people involved in creating and maintaining the culture that defines us. *We* are the people involved in mass media industries and the people who compose their audiences. Together we allow mass communication not only to occur but also to contribute to the creation and maintenance of culture.

Everyone involved has an obligation to participate responsibly. For people working in the media industries, this means professionally and ethically creating and transmitting content. For audience members, it means behaving as critical and thoughtful consumers of that content. Two ways to understand our opportunities and our responsibilities in the mass communication process are to view the mass media as our cultural storytellers and to conceptualize mass communication as a cultural forum.

Mass Media as Cultural Storytellers

A culture's values and beliefs reside in the stories it tells. Who are the good guys? Who are the bad guys? How many of your childhood heroines were even slightly overweight? How many good guys dressed in black? How many heroines lived happily ever after without marrying Prince Charming? Probably not very many. How many news accounts of demonstrations in our streets take the vantage point of the protesters? Again, probably not very many. Our stories help define our realities, shaping the ways we think, feel, and act. "Stories are sites of observations about self and society," explains media theorist Hanno **Hardt (2007**, p. 476). The media's stories—real, imaginary, an intentional or unintentional mixture of the two—become the material for our cultural conversations. Therefore, the "storytellers" have a responsibility to tell their stories in as professional and ethical way as possible.

At the same time, we, the audience for these stories, also have opportunities and responsibilities. We use these stories to learn about the world around us, to understand the values, the way things work, and how the pieces fit together. We have a responsibility to question the tellers and their stories, to interpret the stories in ways consistent with larger or more important cultural values and truths, to be thoughtful, and to reflect on the stories' meanings and what they say about us and our culture. To do less is to miss an opportunity to construct our own meaning and, thereby, culture.



▾ For 131 years the central character in the Aunt Jemima maple syrup story was an unkind racial stereotype. The culture wanted a different take on its past; Aunt Jemima disappeared, but not before she became a central character in an important conversation about race and racism.

John Angelillo/UPI/Alamy Stock Photo

For example, for 131 years, Aunt Jemima, a character from a 19th-century minstrel song that longed for the days before the Civil War ended slavery, was the name and face of a popular maple syrup, featured in its branding and advertising. The product's maker, Quaker Oats, knew something was not quite right about using a racial stereotype as the central character in the story of its brand, so over the years it occasionally updated her look, replacing the "Mammy" kerchief on her head with a plaid headband and later adding pearl earrings and a lace collar to her outfit. But in the wake of the video documentation of George Floyd's killing by Minneapolis police, America undertook a serious reconsideration of their nation's often racist past (and the stories it told itself to gloss over many uncomfortable truths). Quaker Oats responded, deciding it was time to tell a different story with different characters, announcing in mid-2020 the aunt's retirement (**Hsu, 2020**). Mars Food quickly followed suit with its Uncle Ben's Rice (becoming Ben's Original Rice), and two other companies announced they would rethink the racist imagery central to their brands' stories: ConAgra Brands (Mrs. Butter-worth's pancake syrup) and B&G Foods (Cream of Wheat porridge, dropping altogether the image of the grinning Black chef). The culture was tired of these ignorant stories and demanded something better (**Cramer, 2020**).

Mass Communication as Cultural Forum

Imagine a giant courtroom in which we discuss and debate our culture—what it is, and what we want it to be. What do we think about welfare? Single motherhood? Labor unions? Nursing homes? What is the meaning of "successful," "good," "loyal," "moral," "honest," "beautiful," or "patriotic"? We have

cultural definitions or understandings of all these things and more. Where do they come from? How do they develop, take shape, and mature?

Mass communication has become a primary forum for the debate about our culture. Logically, then, the most powerful voices in the forum have the most power to shape our definitions and understandings. Where should that power reside—with the media industries or with their audiences? If you answer "media industries," you will want members of these industries to act professionally and ethically. If you answer "audiences," you will want individual audience members to be thoughtful and critical of the media messages they consume. The forum is only as good, fair, and honest as those who participate in it.

Scope and Nature of Mass Media

No matter how we choose to view the process of mass communication, it is impossible to deny that an enormous portion of our lives is spent interacting with mass media. We spend well over half our day, 13 hours and 35 minutes, interacting with media of some sort (**Dolliver, 2020**).

The average American adult watches 27 hours per week of traditional television; that is, in the home and including live, on-demand, and recorded viewing (**Epstein, 2020**). Watching online video adds another 100 minutes a day (**Brooks, 2020**). A large majority of TV viewers admit to **binge watching**, watching five or more episodes of a series in one sitting. As for 18- to 29-year-old bingers, 76% stay up all night to do so; 51% will watch an entire new season of a show within 24 hours of its release; 45% cancel social plans to binge; and 42% will watch at work to finish a series (**Feldman, 2018**). People watch more than 1 billion hours of video daily on YouTube alone; and there's plenty of material, as 500 hours of new content are uploaded to the site every minute (**Chi, 2021**).

Ninety-three percent of Americans will tune in to the radio every week, averaging 102 minutes a day (**Watson, 2020**), and Americans also stream over 1 trillion songs a year (**Blake, 2020**). We spend more than $11 billion a year at the movies, buying more than a billion-and-a-quarter tickets (**McNary, 2020**). If Facebook were a country, its 2.6 billion users would make it the largest in the world; 1.7 billion people log on daily (**Noyes, 2020**). Seventy-five percent of American households are home to at least one person who plays video games three or more hours a week, and 65% of American adults play video games (**Entertainment Software Association, 2020**).

More than 333 million North Americans, 90% of the population, use the Internet. Globally, 4.9 billion people go online, 63% of the world's population and a 1,271% increase since 2000 (**"Internet Usage," 2021**). One-third of American adults are online "almost constantly" (**Perrin & Atske, 2021**). In *one minute* of Internet time, users will send 210 million e-mails, download 26,000 apps, make 4.2 million Google searches, and send 15.2 million texts (**Heitman, 2021**). There's little doubt that we actively engage the media, but you can see in **Figure 1.1** how Americans' typical levels of consumption rose dramatically when sheltering at home during the 2020 coronavirus pandemic. In fact, so reliant were we on the media to help us get through that difficult time, that 2 months into states' stay-at-home orders, nearly half of Americans "ran out" of things to watch, read, and listen to (**Mandese, 2020**).

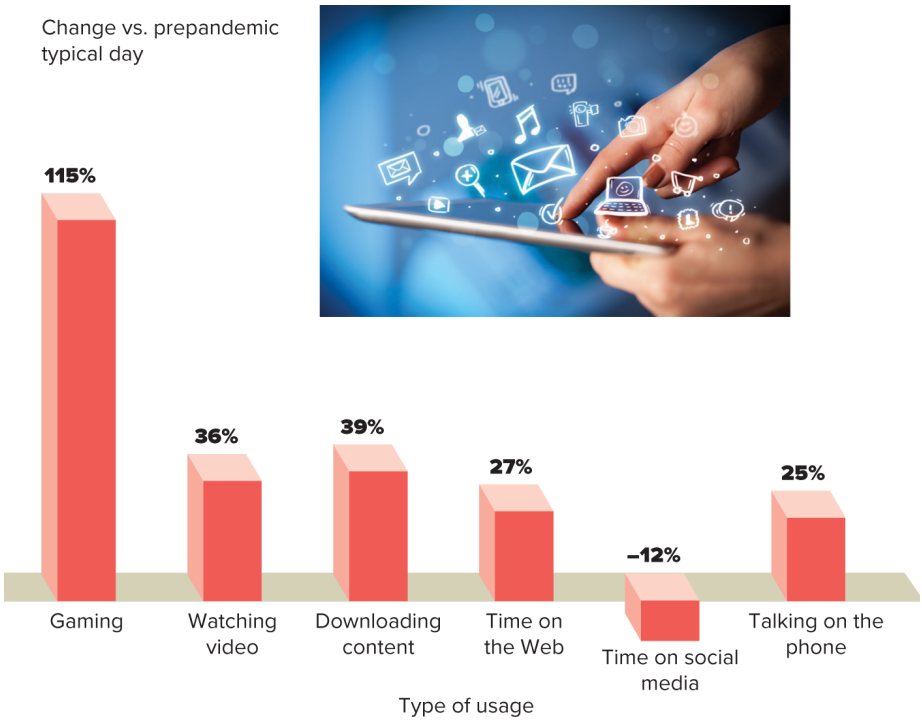


Figure 1.1 Increase in Media Usage over a Typical Pre-Pandemic Day.

Source: ***Waterman, 2020****. (tablet pc) ra2studio/Shutterstock*

Despite the pervasiveness of mass media in our lives, many of us are dissatisfied with or critical of the media industries' performance and much of the content provided. For example, fewer than half of all Americans trust the traditional mass media, and only 27% trust social media as a source of information (**Salmon, 2021**); globally, only 14% of consumers trust advertising to help them gain information about a business (**Stewart, 2020**); 91% of Americans think advertising has become more intrusive in the past few years (**Coppola, 2020**), and even advertising professionals hate commercials: 27% block digital ads, 79% skip TV commercials on their DVRs, and 98% stream ad-free content (**Whitman, 2018**).

Our ambivalence—we criticize, yet we consume—comes in part from our uncertainties about the relationships among the elements of mass communication. What is the role of technology? What is the role of money? And what is *our* role in the mass communication process?

The Role of Technology

To some thinkers, it is machines and their development that drive economic and cultural change. This idea is referred to as **technological determinism**. Certainly, there can be no doubt that movable type contributed to the Protestant Reformation and the decline of the Catholic Church's power in Europe, or that television changed the way members of American families interact, or that social media have altered the nature of friendship. Those who believe in technological determinism would argue that these changes in the cultural landscape were the inevitable result of new technology.

But others see technology as more neutral and claim that the way people *use* technology is what gives it significance. This perspective accepts technology as one of many factors that shape economic and

cultural change; technology's influence is ultimately determined by how much power it is given by the people and cultures that use it.

This disagreement about the power of technology is at the heart of the controversies that always seem to spring up with the introduction of new communication technologies. Are we more or less powerful given the range of media available to us in the digital age? If we are at the mercy of technology, the culture that surrounds us will not be of our making, and the best we can hope to do is make our way reasonably well in a world outside our control. But if these technologies are indeed neutral and their power resides in *how* we choose to use them, we can utilize them responsibly and thoughtfully to construct and maintain whatever kind of culture we want.

Technology does have an impact on communication. At the very least it changes the basic elements of communication. But what technology does not do is relieve us of our obligation to use mass communication responsibly and wisely.

The Role of Money

Money, too, alters communication. It shifts the balance of power; it tends to make audiences products rather than consumers.

The first newspapers were financially supported by their readers; the money they paid for the paper covered its production and distribution. But in the 1830s, a new form of newspaper financing emerged. Publishers began selling their papers for a penny—much less than it cost to produce and distribute them. Because so many more papers were sold at this bargain price, publishers could "sell" advertising space based on their readership. However, what they were actually selling to advertisers was not space on the page—it was readers. How much they could charge advertisers was directly related to how much product (how many readers) they could produce for them.



CULTURAL FORUM

Audience as Consumer or Audience as Product?

People base their judgments of media performance and content on the way they see themselves fitting into the economics of the media industry.

Businesses operate to serve their consumers and make a profit. The consumer comes first, then, but who *is* the consumer in our mass media system? This is a much-debated issue among media practitioners and media critics. Consider the following models.

BUSINESS MODEL	PRODUCER	PRODUCT	CONSUMERS

BUSINESS MODEL	PRODUCER	PRODUCT	CONSUMERS
Basic US Business Model	A manufacturer . . .	produces a product . . .	for consumers who choose to buy or not. The manufacturer must satisfy the consumer. Power resides with consumers.
Basic US Business Model for Cereal: Rice Krispies as Product, Public as Consumer	Kellogg's . . .	produces Rice Krispies . . .	for us, the consumers. If we buy Rice Krispies, Kellogg's makes a profit. Kellogg's must satisfy the consumer. Power resides with consumers.
Basic US Business Model for Television (A): Audience as Product, Advertisers as Consumer	NBC . . .	produces audiences (using its programming) . . .	for advertisers. If they buy NBC's audiences, NBC makes a profit from ad time. NBC must satisfy its consumers, the advertisers. Power resides with advertisers.
Basic US Business Model for Television (B): Programming as Product, Audience as Consumer	NBC . . .	produces (or distributes) programming . . .	for us, the audience. If we watch NBC's shows, NBC makes a profit from ad sales. NBC must satisfy its audience. Power resides with audiences.

Enter Your Voice

The first three models assume that the consumer *buys* the product; that is, the consumer is the one with the money and therefore the one who must be satisfied. The last model makes a different assumption. It sees the audience, even though it does not buy anything, as sufficiently important to NBC's profit-making ability to force NBC to consider the audience's interests above others' (even those of advertisers).

- Which model do you think best represents the economics of American mass media?
- Can you speculate on how the different models might influence the relationship between the media and their audiences?
- How might different models shape the kinds of content available to audiences?

This new type of publication changed the nature of mass communication. The goal of the process was no longer for audience and media to create meaning together. Rather, it was to sell those readers to a third participant: advertisers.

Some observers think this was a devastatingly bad development, not only in the history of mass communication but also in the history of democracy. It robbed people of their voices, or at least made the voices of the advertisers more powerful. Others think it was a huge advance for both mass communication and democracy because it vastly expanded the media, broadening and deepening communication. Models showing these two different ways of viewing mass communication are presented in the box "Audience as Consumer or Audience as Product?" Which model makes more

sense to you? Which do you think is more accurate? ABC journalist Ted Koppel once explained to *The Washington Post,* "[Television] is an industry. It's a business. We exist to make money. We exist to put commercials on the air. The programming that is put on between those commercials is simply the bait we put in the mousetrap" (in **"Soundbites," 2005**, p. 2). Do you think Koppel is unnecessarily cynical, or is he correct in his analysis of television?

The goals of media professionals will be questioned repeatedly throughout this book. For now, keep in mind that ours is a capitalist economic system and that media industries are businesses. Movie producers must sell tickets, book publishers must sell books, and even public broadcasters have bills to pay.

This does not mean, however, that the media are or must be slaves to profit. Our task is to understand the constraints placed on these industries by their economics and then demand that, within those limits, they perform ethically and responsibly. We can do this only by being thoughtful, critical consumers of the media.

Two Revolutions in Mass Communication

Culture and communication are inseparable, and mass communication, as we've seen, is a particularly powerful, pervasive, and complex form of communication. Our level of skill in the mass communication process is therefore of utmost importance. This skill is not necessarily a simple one to master (it is much more than booting up the computer, turning on the television, or flipping through the pages of your favorite magazine). But it is, indeed, a learnable skill, one that can be practiced. This skill is **media literacy**—the ability to effectively and efficiently comprehend and use any form of mediated communication. But let's start with the first mass medium, books, and the technology that enabled their spread, the printing press.

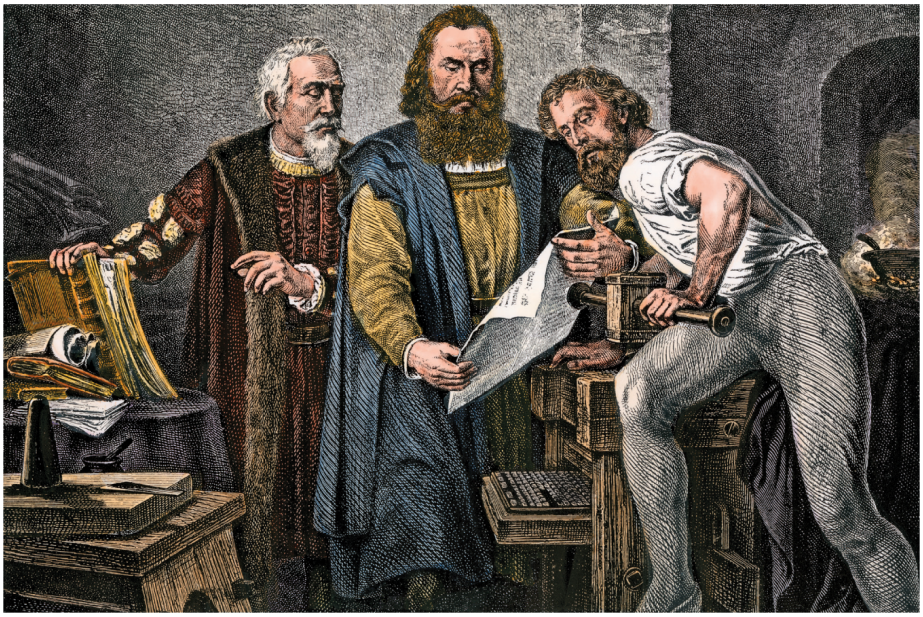
The Gutenberg Revolution

Marshall McLuhan expressed his admiration for Gutenberg's innovation by calling his 1962 book *The Gutenberg Galaxy.* In it, he argued that the advent of print is the key to our modern consciousness because **literacy**—the ability to effectively and efficiently comprehend and use written symbols—had existed since the development of the first alphabets more than 5,000 years ago, it was reserved for very few, the elites. Gutenberg's work was world-changing because it opened literacy to all; that is, it allowed *mass* communication.

THE IMPACT OF PRINT

Although Gutenberg developed his printing press with a limited use in mind, printing Bibles, the cultural effects of mass printing have been profound.

Handwritten or hand-copied materials were expensive to produce, and the cost of an education, in time and money, had made reading an expensive luxury. However, with the spread of printing, written communication was available to a much larger portion of the population, and the need for literacy among the lower and middle classes grew. The ability to read became less of a luxury and more of a necessity; eventually literacy spread, as did education. Soldiers at the front needed to be able to read the emperor's orders. Butchers needed to understand the king's shopping list. So the demand for literacy expanded, and more (and more types of) people learned to read.



▲ Johannes Gutenberg takes the first proof from his printing press.

North Wind Picture Archives

Tradespeople, soldiers, clergy, bakers, and musicians all now had business at the printer's shop. They talked. They learned of things, both in conversation and by reading printed material. As more people learned to read, new ideas germinated and spread, and cross-pollination of ideas occurred.

More material from various sources was published, and people were freer to read what they wanted when they wanted. Dominant authorities—the Crown and the Church—were now less able to control communication and, therefore, the people. New ideas about the world appeared; new understandings of the existing world flourished.

In addition, duplication permitted standardization and preservation. Myth and superstition began to make way for standard, verifiable bodies of knowledge. History, economics, physics, and chemistry all became part of the culture's intellectual life. Literate cultures were now on the road to modernization.

Printed materials were the first mass-produced product, speeding the development and entrenchment of capitalism. We live today in a world built on these changes. Use of the printing press helped fuel the establishment and growth of a large middle class. No longer must societies be composed of rulers and subjects; printing sped the rise of democracy. No longer were power and wealth solely functions of birth; power and wealth could now be created by the industrious. No longer was political discourse limited to accepting the dictates of Crown and Church; printing had given ordinary people a powerful voice.



▲ This page from a Gutenberg Bible shows the exquisite care the printer used in creating his works. The artwork in the margins is hand painted, but the text is mechanically printed.

North Wind Picture Archives/Alamy Stock Photo

The Industrial Revolution

By the mid-18th century, printing and its libraries of science and mathematics had become powerful engines driving the Industrial Revolution. Print was responsible for building and disseminating bodies of knowledge, leading to scientific and technological developments and the refinement of new

machines. In addition, industrialization reduced the time necessary to complete work, and this created something previously unknown to most working people—leisure time.

Industrialization had another effect as well. As workers left their sunrise-to-sunset jobs in agriculture, the crafts, and trades to work in the newly industrialized factories, not only did they have more leisure time, but they also had more money to spend on their leisure. Farmers, fishermen, and tile makers had to put their profits back into their jobs. But factory workers took their money home; it was spendable. Combine leisure time and expendable cash with the spread of literacy, and the result is a large and growing audience for printed *information* and *entertainment.* By the mid-19th century, a mass audience and the means to reach it existed.

Media Literacy

Television influences our culture in innumerable ways. One of its effects, according to many people, is that it has encouraged violence in our society. For example, American television viewers overwhelmingly say there is too much violence on television. Yet, almost without exception, the local television news program that has the largest proportion of violence in its nightly newscast is the ratings leader. "If it bleeds, it leads" has become the motto for much of local television news. It leads because people watch.

So, although many of us are quick to condemn improper media performance or to identify and lament its harmful effects, we rarely question our own role in the mass communication process. We overlook it because we participate in mass communication naturally, almost without conscious effort. We possess high-level interpretive and comprehension skills that make even the most sophisticated television show, movie, or magazine story understandable and enjoyable. We are able, through a lifetime of interaction with the media, to *read media texts.*

Media literacy is a skill we take for granted, but like all skills, it can be improved. And if we consider how important the mass media are in creating and maintaining the culture that helps define us and our lives, it is a skill that *must* be improved.

Hunter College media professor Stuart **Ewen (2000)** emphasized this point in comparing media literacy with traditional literacy. "Historically," he wrote, "links between literacy and democracy are inseparable from the notion of an informed populace, conversant with the issues that touch upon their lives, enabled with tools that allow them to participate actively in public deliberation and social change" (p. 448). To Ewen, and others committed to media literacy, media literacy represents no less than the means to full participation in the culture.

Elements of Media Literacy

Media scholar Art **Silverblatt (2008)** identifies seven fundamental elements of media literacy. To these, we will add an eighth. Media literacy includes these characteristics:

1. *A critical thinking skill enabling audience members to develop independent judgments about media content.* Thinking critically about the content we consume is the very essence of media literacy. Why do we watch what we watch, read what we read, listen to what we listen to? Is that story you saw on Twitter real? If we cannot answer these questions, we have taken no responsibility for ourselves or our choices. As such, we have taken no responsibility for the outcome of those choices.
2. *An understanding of the process of mass communication.* If we know the components of the mass communication process and how they relate to one another, we can form expectations of how they can serve us. How do the various media industries operate? What are their obligations to us? What are the obligations of the audience? How do different media limit or enhance messages? Which forms of feedback are most effective, and why?
3. *An awareness of the impact of media on the individual and society.* Writing and the printing press helped change the world and the people in it. Mass media do the same. If we ignore the impact of

media on our lives, we run the risk of being caught up and carried along by that change rather than controlling or leading it.

4. *Strategies for analyzing and discussing media messages.* To consume media messages thoughtfully, we need a foundation on which to base thought and reflection. If we make meaning, we must possess the tools with which to make it (for example, understanding the intent and impact of film and video conventions, such as camera angles and lighting, or the strategy behind the placement of images on a newspaper's website). Otherwise, meaning is made for us; the interpretation of media content will then rest with its creator, not with us.
5. *An understanding of media content as a text that provides insight into our culture and our lives.* How do we know a culture and its people, attitudes, values, concerns, and myths? We know them through communication. For modern cultures like ours, media messages increasingly dominate that communication, shaping our understanding of and insight into our culture.





◂ *Family Guy* has all the things you would expect from a television situation comedy—an inept dad, a precocious daughter, a slacker son, a loving wife, and zany situations. Yet it also offers an intellectual, philosopher dog and an evil-genius, scheming baby. Why do you think the producers have gone to the trouble to populate this show with the usual trappings of a sitcom but then add other, bizarre elements? And what's going on in *The Hand-maid's Tale*? Is it an action-laden adventure full of intrigue, danger, and romance? A feminist manifesto? A history lesson disguised as dystopian fiction. Or maybe it's just a fun way to spend a cozy night binge watching.

(top) FOX Image Collection/Getty Images; (bottom) Calla Kessler for The Washington Post/Getty Images

6. *The ability to enjoy, understand, and appreciate media content.* Media literacy does not mean living the life of a grump, liking nothing in the media, or always being suspicious of harmful effects and cultural degradation. We take high school and college classes to enhance our understanding and appreciation of novels; we can do the same for media texts. Learning to enjoy, understand, and appreciate media content includes the ability to use **multiple points of access**—to approach media content from a variety of directions and derive from it many levels of meaning. Thus, we control meaning making for our own enjoyment or appreciation. For example, we can enjoy the hit show *The Handmaid's Tale* on Hulu as an action-laden adventure full of intrigue, danger, and romance, perfect for binge watching. But as TV buffs we might see it as a feminist manifesto, a story of an oppressed woman taking on a powerful man. Or we might read it as a cautionary tale for what might happen in America if women lose the right to control their bodies. Maybe it's a history lesson disguised as dystopian fiction, reminding us that women have always had to fight for their rightful place in society. Or maybe it's just a fun way to spend a cozy night, entertained by the same streaming video industry that so delights us with other prestige programming, such as *The Mandalorian*, *13 Reasons Why*, and *Fleabag*.
7. *Development of effective and responsible production skills.* Traditional literacy assumes that people who can read can also write. Media literacy also makes this assumption. Our definition of literacy (of either type) calls not only for effective and efficient comprehension of content but also for its effective and efficient *use.* Therefore, media-literate individuals should develop production skills that enable them to create useful media messages. If you have ever tried to make a narrative home video—one that tells a story—you know that producing content is much more difficult than consuming it. If you have ever posted to Snapchat or Instagram or uploaded a video to TikTok, you are indeed a media content producer; why not be a good media content producer?

8. *An understanding of the ethical and moral obligations of media practitioners.* To make informed judgments about the performance of the media, we also must be aware of the competing pressures on practitioners as they do their jobs. We must understand the media's official and unofficial rules of operation. In other words, we must know, respectively, their legal and ethical obligations. Return, for a moment, to the question of televised violence. It is legal for a station to air graphic violence. But is it ethical? If it is unethical, what power, if any, do we have to demand its removal from our screens? Dilemmas such as this are discussed at length in **Chapter 14**.

Media Literacy Skills

Consuming media content is simple. Push a button and you have images on a television or music on your car radio. Come up with enough cash and you can see a movie or buy an e-book. Media-literate consumption, however, requires a number of specific skills.

1. *The ability and willingness to make an effort to understand content, to pay attention, and to filter out noise.* As we saw earlier, anything that interferes with successful communication is called noise, and much of the noise in the mass communication process results from our own consumption behavior. When we watch television, often we are also doing other things, such as eating, reading, or checking Instagram. We drive while we listen to the radio. We text while we read. Obviously, the quality of our meaning making is related to the effort we give it.
2. *An understanding of and* respect *for the power of media messages.* We are surrounded by mass media from the moment we are born. Just about every one of us can enjoy them. Their content is either

free or relatively inexpensive. Much of the content is banal and a bit silly, so it is easy to dismiss media content as beneath serious consideration or too simple to have any influence. We also disregard media's power through the **third-person effect**—the common attitude that others are influenced by media messages but that we are not. That is, we are media literate enough to understand the influence of mass communication on the attitudes, behaviors, and values of others but not self-aware or honest enough to see its influence on our lives.

3. *The ability to distinguish emotional from reasoned reactions when responding to content and to act accordingly.* Media content is often designed to touch us at the emotional level. We enjoy losing ourselves in a good song or in a well-crafted movie or television show; this is among our great pleasures. But because we react emotionally to these messages does not mean they don't have serious meanings and implications for our lives. Television images, for example, are intentionally shot and broadcast for their emotional impact. Reacting emotionally is appropriate and proper. But then what? What do these images tell us about the larger issue at hand? We can use our feelings as a point of departure for meaning making. We can ask, "Why does this content make me feel this way?"
4. *The development of heightened expectations of media content.* We all use media to tune out, waste a little time, and provide background noise. When we decide to watch television, we are more likely to turn on the set and flip channels until we find something passable than we are to read the listings to find a specific program to view. When we search for online video, we often settle for the "10 most shared today," or we let Netflix's algorithm choose for us. When we expect little from the content before us, we tend to give meaning making little effort and attention.

5. *A knowledge of genre conventions and the ability to recognize when they are being mixed.* The term **genre** refers to the categories of expression within the different media, such as "evening news," "documentary," "horror movie," or "entertainment magazine." Each genre is characterized by certain distinctive, standardized style elements—the **conventions** of that genre. The conventions of the evening news, for example, include a short, upbeat introductory theme and one or two good-looking people sitting at a large, modern desk. When we hear and see these style elements, we expect the evening news. We can tell a documentary film from an entertainment movie by its more serious tone and a number of talking heads. We know by their appearance—the use of color, the types of images, and the amount of text on the cover—which magazines offer serious reading and which provide entertainment. Knowledge of these conventions is important because they cue or direct our meaning making.
6. *The ability to think critically about media messages, no matter how credible their sources.* It is crucial that media be credible in a democracy in which the people govern because the media are central to the governing process. This is why the news media are sometimes referred to as the fourth branch of government, complementing the executive, judicial, and legislative branches. This does not mean, however, that we should accept uncritically everything they report. But media-literate people know not to discount *all* news media; they must be careful to avoid the **hostile media effect**, the idea that people see media coverage of important topics of interest as less sympathetic to their position, more sympathetic to the opposing position, and generally hostile to their point of view regardless of the quality of the coverage (**Tsfati & Cohen, 2013**). There are indeed very good media sources, just as there are those not deserving of our consideration. Media literacy, as you'll read throughout this text, helps us make that distinction. For example, the Internet has made possible the widespread of **fake news**, intentionally and verifiably false news stories designed to be spread and to deceive.

Disguised to appear authentic, its real intention is to sow confusion and damage political discourse. Fake news is successful because its arresting headlines easily catch our attention and because **confirmation bias**, our tendency to accept information that confirms our beliefs and dismiss information that does not, encourages us to pass it on with little evaluation. How do we combat fake news?

- *First, vet the publisher's credibility*. Does the report meet traditional journalistic standards of evidence and corroboration? Has the author published anything else? What's the domain name? Check out the "About Us" page for indicators of bias.
- *Second, pay attention to quality and timeliness*. Is the story current, or is it recycled? Are there a lot of spelling errors, ALL CAPS, or dramatic punctuation???!!!
- *Third, check sources and citations*. How did you come upon the article? Who is or is not quoted? Is there supporting information on other sites? Can you perform reverse searches for sources and images?
- *Finally, ask a pro*. There are several good fact-checking sites such as **FactCheck.org**, International Fact-Checking Network, PolitiFact, and Snopes (**Nagler, 2018**).

7. *A knowledge of the internal language of various media and the ability to understand its effects, no matter how complex.* Just as each media genre has its own distinctive style and conventions, each medium also has its own specific internal language. This language is expressed in **production values**—the choice of lighting, editing, special effects, music, camera angle, location on the page, and size and placement of headlines. To be able to read a media text, you must understand its language. We learn the grammar of this language as early as childhood—for example, we know that when the television image goes "all woozy," the character is dreaming. Let's consider two versions of the same movie scene.



▲ *The Daily Show with Trevor Noah* offers all the conventions we'd expect from the news—background digital graphics, an anchor behind his desk, and a well-known interviewee. But it also contains conventions we'd expect from a comedy program— a satirist as host and an

unruly, loud audience. Why does this television show mix the conventions of these two very different genres? Does your knowledge of those conventions add to your enjoyment of this hit program?

Jason Kempin/Getty Images Enter-tainment/Getty Images

In the first, a man is driving a car. Cut to a woman lying tied up on a railroad track. What is the relationship between the man and the woman? Where is he going? With no more information than these two shots, you know automatically that he cares for her and is on his way to save her. Now, here is the second version. The man is driving the car. Fade to black. Fade back up to the woman on the tracks. Now, what is the relationship between the man and the woman? Where is he going? It is less clear that these two people even have anything to do with each other. We construct completely different meanings from exactly the same two scenes because the punctuation (the quick cut/fade) differs.

Media texts tend to be more complicated than these two scenes. The better we can handle their grammar, the more we can understand and appreciate texts. The more we understand texts, the more we can be equal partners with media professionals in meaning making.



MEDIA LITERACY CHALLENGE

Recognizing Cultural Values

Media-literate people develop *an understanding of media content as a text that provides insight into our culture and our lives,* and they have *an awareness of the impact of media on the individual and society.* So, challenge your own media literacy skills. You can do this exercise with a parent or another person older than you, or you can speculate after using the Internet to view movies and television shows from 20 years ago. Compare your childhood heroes and heroines with those of someone older. What differences are there between the generations in what you consider heroic qualities? What are some similarities and differences between the heroic qualities you and people from an earlier generation identify? Are the good qualities of your personal heroes something you can find in today's movies or TV? If so, where on TV or in film can you find the qualities you consider heroic? Which cultural values, attitudes, and beliefs, if any, do you think have influenced how heroes and heroines have changed throughout the last few decades? How have the media helped establish the values you identify as important qualities in people?

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Introduction to Chapter 2

About This Chapter

While the first chapter is mostly about definitions, the second chapter is much more about the economics of the media. As a result, we often refer to this chapter as "Thinking Critically About Mass Communication: Economics."

How cool are we? We actually followed up a chapter about definitions with one about something arguably even less interesting—economics. Honestly, what have you gotten yourself into with this class?

The answer is that you've gotten yourself behind the curtain, into a discussion of how things really work. As a group of wise men once wrote, cash does, in fact, rule everything around us, and if you want to understand how the world works then you have to follow the money. That means understanding not just how various media corporations make their money—something we'll talk about more as we get to each individual mass medium we're going to study—but how the entire economic system works in the world of mass media, how it is changing, and how that impacts you as a media consumer. It's that larger, system-level view that this chapter is about.

WHAT TO FOCUS ON

This chapter introduces a number of economic themes that you will encounter over and over again throughout the semester, so it pays to figure them out now so you can have that knowledge ready as you move forward in the class. That means you need to focus on understanding all the basic terms in this chapter: vertical integration, convergence, consolidation of ownership, conglomeration, oligopoly, audience fragmentation, and niche marketing.

In addition to understanding the basic terms, you'll also need to focus on the "preliminary information" in the next section of the chapter, specifically the story of government regulation of industry in the United States. In the chapter itself, pay special attention to the statistics and trends that help us understand how the media consumption landscape is changing. Your instructor will help you determine which specific statistics and perspectives to pay the most attention to.

Introductory Information About Convergence and the Reshaping of Mass Communication

Vertical Integration

One of the most important ideas driving growth and change in the media industry is vertical integration. In Chapter 6, this term is defined as "a system in which studios produced their own films, distributed them through their own outlets, and exhibited them in their own theaters." Unfortunately, that definition suggests that vertical integration is limited to the film industry, and that it is *only* something that occurs in that part of the media economy. Since so many of the various media sectors and corporations we'll be dealing with in the class are vertically integrated, we need a broader definition.

The *Oxford Dictionary of Economics* defines **vertical integration** as "The combination in one firm of two or more stages of production usually operated by separate firms."[1] That's the definition we'll use for the class. The reason we're using that definition is twofold. First, it clarifies that vertical integration isn't just something that happens in the film industry. Second, it provides a broad definition of vertical integration that helps explain why it has become so powerful.

So, let's go back to the definition in Chapter 6. The reason that chapter focuses on film is that vertical integration gained notoriety when early movie studios realized that they could make more money if they not only made films, but if they also bought the companies that distributed the films *and* the theaters that exhibited them. At the time, movies were a new and incredibly profitable enterprise, so if a company owned the studio that made a film, the company that copied and distributed it, and the theaters that showed it to the public, then that company would be making money at every stage of the film-making process. Studios that pursued vertical integration made incredibly profits during the early heyday of movies, and the tactic became very popular both inside and outside the media sector. There are still many examples of very similar moves by companies in the entertainment industry. Why is Netflix so interested in making original movies and television shows? Because that is an example of vertical integration where a company that previously only owned the distribution part of a market realizes it can make more money by also owning the production part of that same market. Similarly, Disney, DC, and many other companies that produce entertainment content are now creating their own distribution networks to rival Netflix. This is also motivated by a desire for vertical integration (and, of course, increased profits).

The entire media sector is full of companies that are vertically integrated. Comcast, for example, is generally known to the public because it provides distribution of entertainment in the form of cable television and Internet access. However, Comcast also owns NBC and the film studio Universal Pictures. This makes Comcast both an entertainment producer and an entertainment distributor. But, as our definition suggests, modern vertical integration is broader than it was in the middle of the last century—Comcast, for example, also owns Universal Studios theme parks. So, yes, you bought your Harry Potter wand and your butterbeer from Comcast. Theme parks are hard to classify using the traditional "productiondistribution-exhibition" model of entertainment supply, but Comcast sees them

as part of its efforts to achieve vertical integration and make money from every aspect of entertainment. Similarly, Comcast owns the Philadelphia Flyers professional hockey franchise, which can be seen as a different sort of entertainment content producer. Comcast also owns the building the Flyers play in, which might be seen as an entertainment exhibition site. Most large media corporations also own different kinds of companies in order to try to take advantage of the power of vertical integration.

Focus on Critical Thinking: What is the History of Media Regulation in the United States?

Media in the United States have been subject to government regulation almost since their inception. While media organizations have a special place in the history of government regulation, it's impossible to understand how that came to pass without at least a little background in the overall history of government regulation in the United States.

EARLY ANTITRUST EFFORTS

The most commonly told story about the trends of government regulation in the U.S. is that a wave of antitrust legislation began in the late 1800s, and the national fervor for regulating big business continued unabated until the election of Ronald Reagan, when we began a period of deregulation that continues to this day. The truth, however, is considerably more complicated. The original trust-busting era began in the late 1800s due to sudden and profound economic changes in the United States. Historian Richard Hofstadter notes that prior to the rise of large corporations and trusts in the latter part of the 1800s, "Americans came to take it for granted that property would be widely diffused, that economic and political power would be decentralized."[2] But after the Civil War ended, rapid industrialization transformed the country and very large corporations arose to take advantage of new technological innovations. Wealth began to concentrate in the hands of a few, and "a wholly new economy came into being" in very short order.[3] Not only was there public pressure on the government to act to check the growing economic power of large corporations, there was also concern that corporations could become so powerful that they would encourage the government to act as a tyrannical protector of their interests.

Congress passed **The Sherman Antitrust Act** in 1890, the first of a series of federal laws designed to put a damper on corporate growth and power. The Sherman Act stated that "Every contract, combination in the form of trust or otherwise, or conspiracy, in restraint of trade or commerce among the several States, or with foreign nations, is declared to be illegal."[4] While the act definitely led to a number of high-profile actions to break up large corporations, the language of the law is quite vague, and many of the act's supporters saw it as something that would inevitably need further legislation to help define its terms and enable further action.

Thus, in 1914, congress passed **The Clayton Antitrust Act**. This act took several steps to clarify existing law and to add new antitrust provisions. It banned anti-competitive price discrimination, it banned mergers and acquisitions that damaged competition, and it declared that no person could be a director of two competing corporations. Crucially, it also outlawed the practice of selling only to those who agree not to deal with a competitor. So, for example, if Coca-Cola refused to sell to QuikTrip unless QuikTrip promised not to sell Pepsi products, that would violate the Clayton Antitrust Act—at least in

theory. However, you may notice that many businesses (such as restaurants and movie theaters) only sell either Coke or Pepsi. That is because the two soda companies sign exclusivity agreements with those businesses that guarantee a lower price on their products. They also provide soda-dispensing equipment free of charge on the condition that the equipment is only used to serve their product. However, there are still lawsuits between the two soda companies from time to time based on alleged violation of antitrust law.

The final major piece of antitrust legislation passed during this initial period was **The Federal Trade Commission Act**. This act established the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), and empowered it to prevent unfair competition, seek damages from bad actors, create new trade regulation rules, conduct investigations of anticompetitive practices, and make reports and recommendations to congress. The FTC can issue cease-and-desist orders to any corporation it decides is engaging in unfair trading practices, though of course the corporation can always go to court to defend itself. Though many other pieces of trade-related legislation were passed during this period, these three acts—The Sherman Antitrust Act, the Clayton Antitrust Act, and the Federal Trade Commission Act—formed the backbone of early attempts to check the growth and power of large corporations in the United States. In fact, all three acts remain in force today, though they have each been substantially modified and amended over the years.

MEDIA AND GOVERNMENT REGULATION

Film and media scholar Jennifer Holt describes the entertainment industry's history with antitrust issues as "rich and complex,"[5] and it is easy to see why. Thomas Edison's attempt to corner the market on movie-making (see "The Big Studios" in **Chapter 6**) was broken up by the Clayton Antitrust Act in 1915, only one year after the legislation's passage. There have been many different laws governing the regulation of various media over the years and we will discuss these laws individually later in the book (see "The Coming of Regulation" and "Deregulation and Ownership" in **Chapter 7**), but it is useful to discuss the general course of regulation's history in the media sector here at the beginning.

The initial antitrust fervor of the early 1900s receded during the Great Depression and World War II to a period of inactivity often characterized as neglect. The country was awash in patriotism during the war, and media industries were a key tool of patriotic propaganda. This led to increased trust in corporations (who were seen as crucial to the war effort) and media companies (who were seen as crucial disseminators of information about the war). After the war, however, new interest in pursuing antitrust action led to a period during the 1960s and very early 1970s where antitrust enforcement in the U.S. grew to be particularly vigorous. It is often suggested that deregulation in the U.S. began with Ronald Reagan's election in 1980, but the trend toward deregulation actually began in the 1970s, as the country experienced a declining economy. With President Richard Nixon and then President Jimmy Carter, a trend toward deregulation began, as did a new era of limited antitrust enforcement that would allow for levels of industrial concentration not seen since the early twentieth century."[6] President Reagan, a former actor and president of The Screen Actors Guild, certainly accelerated the trend toward deregulation in general and media deregulation in particular. Notably, the Reagan administration declared that vertical integration was not a cause for concern when it came to antitrust issues, and that general viewpoint is still represented in the official policy of the Department of Justice.[7] Not a single corporate move toward vertical integration was challenged by the Reagan

administration during his time in office, and only a tiny percentage of corporate mergers in general were challenged during that time.

Presidential administrations since Reagan have tended to pursue either regulatory or deregulatory impulses depending on their party identity, with Republican presidents strongly tending toward deregulation and Democratic presidents more apt to pursue antitrust enforcement. The irony of the media sector, however, is that the largest single act of deregulation since Reagan took place during Bill Clinton's presidency. **The Telecommunications Act of 1996** undid many years of policy that was generally designed to prevent the control of the media by large corporations. While the act was complex, the "net effect of the Telecommunications Act in terms of media ownership was that one company could now own significantly more broadcast stations than ever before, and cable systems were legally permitted to combine with broadcast networks and phone companies."[8] This change produced massive concentration of ownership in the media sector, laying "the foundation for the global media conglomerates of the new millennium."[9] The Telecommunications Act of 1996 not only fueled the growth of very large media corporations, it also prompted revolutionary changes in the media itself. When it became legal for cable companies like Comcast to merge with broadcast networks like NBC, corporate executives were incentivized to think of new ways to merge formerly separate aspects of the media sector. This has made it harder and harder for the government to regulate media effectively. "New delivery platforms and the convergence of distribution technologies have rendered the language and objects of regulation inadequate at best, and media industries have long outgrown the dimensions and arbiters of current policy."[10]

The history of media regulation in the United States is much more complicated than traditional narratives might suggest. While Reagan's administration certainly worked to deregulate many different industries, they were building on the deregulatory efforts of both Democratic and Republican administrations in the previous decade. And, while Democratic presidents have been more prone to regulation than Republican presidents since the 1980s, the overall trend has been toward deregulation. When it comes to media in particular, the largest single piece of legislation removing regulation happened under a Democratic president, so we need to be skeptical of any efforts to reduce media regulation to a contest between the two major political parties.

What to Study

KEY WORDS

- Vertical Integration
- The Sherman Antitrust Act
- The Clayton Antitrust Act
- The Federal Trade Commission Act
- The Telecommunications Act of 1996
- Day-and-Date Release
- Media Multi-tasking
- Electronic Sell-Through
- Convergence
- Concentration of Ownership
- Conglomeration
- News Deserts
- Ghost Papers
- Economies of scale
- Oligopoly
- Taste Publics
- Globalization
- Audience Fragmentation
- Targeting/Niche Marketing/Narrowcasting
- Hypercommercialism
- Product Placement
- Brand entertainment

Meme

QUESTIONS YOU SHOULD BE ABLE TO ANSWER

- What is vertical integration and why is it an important concept for media studies?
- What has been the overall historical trend in terms of government regulation of media? Is it true that Democrats have increased media regulation while Republicans have decreased it?
- When did major antitrust efforts begin in the United States and why?
- What were the first three major pieces of antitrust legislation in the United States, and what did each piece of legislation do?
- In which presidential administrations did the post-1960s trend toward deregulation begin?
- What did The Telecommunications Act of 1996 do, and what were some of its impacts in the media sector?
- What are the general trends in shifting media consumption?
- What are the 5 companies that control the majority of the media content consumed by Americans?
- What are the general trends in media in terms of concentration of ownership and conglomeration?
- What is the relationship in the media between concentration of ownership, conglomeration, and audience fragmentation? Between concentration of ownership, conglomeration, and the freedom of the press?
- What is the concern about the possible relationship between globalization and diversity of expression?

NOTES

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Convergence and the Reshaping of Mass Communication

2



Netflix's *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt: Kimmy vs. The Reverend* lets viewers control the movie's narrative—a clear sign of significant change in how we interact with media.

PictureLux /The Hollywood Archive/Alamy Stock Photo

1830s Birth of the mass media system as we know it today

1945 Supreme Court Justice Hugo Black claims that a free press is a condition of a free society

1900



Interfoto/History/Alamy Stock Photo; CBS/Photofest

1950s ▶ Television displaces radio

1967 Richard Dawkins introduces the term "meme"

1970 Postal Reorganization Act

1974 Internet emerges

1982 60% of journalists say they had compete freedom to choose their stories, as opposed to 34% 25 years later after explosion of concentration and conglomeration

1996 ▶ DVD introduced

1950



Howard Kingsnorth/ Photodisc/Getty Images



fyv6561/Shutterstock

2004 ▶ Facebook debuts

2012 ▶ Facebook buys Instagram

2014 Apple buys Beats Music; YouTube buys Twitch

2015 Actavision buys game company King Digital Entertainment; AT&T buys DirecTV

2016 Pepe the Frog becomes a hate symbol due to meme portrayals; news deserts proliferate

2018 State of New Jersey funds local journalism; Sirius XM buys Pandora

2019 Americans stream more than 1 trillion tunes for first time

2020 Coronavirus in US

2021 Warner Bros. releases all new films day-and-date

2000



fyv6561/Shutterstock

"I DIDN'T LIKE THE ENDING."

"But you made it happen. The producers gave you a lot of choices. Make out or read the book? Walk 12 miles or wait 4,000 minutes for Uber? Eat the mushrooms and skip the banquet or eat the food and the women get harassed? The whole point of *Kimmy vs. The Reverend* is that it's interactive. You create your own movie through the choices you make. Netflix did this before; remember the *Black Mirror* episode *Bandersnatch*?"

"Yeah, but *Bandersnatch* was science fiction. It wasn't supposed to have a happy ending. I wanted *Kimmy* to have a happy ending."

"So you got the not-so-happy ending, but it was *your* ending."

"I don't get it. Maybe I should pay more attention!"

Like our disappointed viewer, we all will need to pay better attention to a mass communication process undergoing fundamental alteration, and that change goes far beyond interactive storylines. Well before the

coronavirus shut down all US movie theaters, for example, producers were already streaming their films directly to fans. In 2018 Netflix gave the Sandra Bullock horror hit *Birdbox* **day-and-date release**, simultaneously streaming it on its pay service and screening it in theaters. Netflix's Spanish-language *Roma* had day-and-date release that same year, earning 10 Oscar nominations, including one for Best Picture and winning for Best International Feature Film.

So, already interested in direct-to-audience distribution, the big Hollywood studios jumped in full force when the pandemic struck. Disney rushed *Frozen 2,* scheduled for summer release, to its streaming service, and Universal's animated feature, *Trolls World Tour,* made $100 million in streaming rentals in 3 weeks, more than the original on which it was based earned in 5 months in theaters (**Friedman, 2020b**). Before the pandemic was fully controlled, even much-anticipated blockbusters like *Wonder Woman 1984* were enjoying Christmas Day, 2020, day-and-date release, and Warner Bros. decided to release every one of its 17 new 2021 movies day-and-date, including big-budget titles like *Dune, The Matrix 4,* and *The Suicide Squad* (**Barnes & Sperling, 2020**). Not to be outdone, Netflix debuted 71 feature films, some streaming only, some day-and-date, in 2021, more than one a week (**Friedman, 2021**).

There is indeed a seismic shift going on in the mass media—and therefore in mass communication—that dwarfs the changes to the media landscape wrought by television's assault on the preeminence of radio and movies in the 1950s and 1960s. Encouraged by the Internet, digitization, and mobility, producers are finding new ways to deliver new content to audiences. The media industries are in turmoil, and audience members, as they are confronted by a seemingly bewildering array of possibilities, are now coming to terms with these new media.

How will you listen to the radio—satellite radio, terrestrial radio, digital terrestrial radio, or streamed Internet radio? If it's streamed over the Internet, is it still "radio"? You may not hold the physical newspaper in your hands, but when you access a newspaper's story on its app (abbreviation for *application;* software for mobile digital devices), you're reading the newspaper. Or are you? What will you pay to stream movies, $20, or will you subscribe to Red Carpet Home Cinema and get immediate access to first-run movies not otherwise available for home viewing for $1,500 to $3,000 each? What about on-demand TV shows?



▲ *Trolls World Tour earned Universal Pictures $100 million in three weeks from 5 million streaming rentals.*

DreamWorks/Universal/Kobal/Shutterstock

Would you be willing to view the commercials they contain if you could pay a bit less per episode? Would you pay more or less for classic programming than for contemporary shows? On which platform (the means of delivering a specific piece of media content) might you most enjoy watching your movies? Would you be willing to pay more or less for different platforms? In theaters? On your tablet or phone? On a wide-screen home TV? Is there such a thing as the "moviegoing experience" anymore? These are precisely the kinds of

questions that audiences will continue to answer in the next several years. Media-literate audiences will be better equipped to do so.

Traditional Media Industries in Transition: The Bad News and the Good

The way we interact with the mass media is indeed changing. Although this shift is good news for media consumers, it has not necessarily been beneficial for the established media industries. Just how much pain has been produced by this "perfect storm" of rapid technological change and our shifting consumption behavior? Here are a few examples:

- Although Americans typically spend over $11 billion a year at the movies, they continue to buy fewer tickets per person every year than they did in the past. Only 14% of American adults go to the movies once a month or more (**"Frequency," 2020**).
- Sales in the US of physical and digital music albums continue to fall, declining 18.7% between 2018 and 2019; the sale of individual digital songs dropped 25% in that time (**Nielsen Music, 2020**).
- Fifteen years ago, the four major broadcast networks commanded over 60% of all television viewing. Today their share hovers around 30%. The top-rated program in 1980 was *Dallas*, viewed in more than 34% of all homes with a television. In 1990, it was *Cheers*, watched by 21% of all TV homes. Today a top-rated show, such as *NCIS,* will draw 5% ("Tops of," 2020).
- US sales of DVD and Blue-Ray discs continue to decline, dropping 22% between 2018 and 2019 (**Schnieder, 2020**).
- One in five American newspapers has closed since 2004 (**Sullivan, 2020**); circulation has fallen to its lowest level since 1940 (**Grieco, 2020**).
- The US magazine industry saw a 20% drop in revenues from 2019 to 2020 (**Gingerich, 2020**).
- Annual revenue for traditional AM/FM radio in the US has decreased every year since 2015 (**Hissong, 2020**).

The challenge facing the traditional media industries today is how to capture a mass audience now fragmented into millions of niches, that is, into increasingly smaller subaudiences now accustomed to interacting with them in a growing variety of ways. Yet there is some good news for the media industries in all this change. Despite the fact that we are indeed consuming media in new and different ways, our levels of consumption are at an all-time high.

We saw in **Chapter 1** that Americans spend well over half of a full day engaged with media of some sort, a practice made possible in part by the comfort with **media multitasking**, engaging simultaneously with many different media. Those declining ratings for network television? Viewers returned in droves during 2020's coronavirus shelter-at-home. The four national networks (ABC, CBS, Fox, and NBC) saw a 20% increase in viewership. Ratings for their evening news programs jumped 42% over those of the same period the year before (**Epstein, 2020**). Time with television, already on the rise because of the many subscription video streaming services, such as HBO Now, Apple +, Amazon Prime, Netflix, Hulu, and scores more, boomed during the coronarivus quarantine. Viewers spend $16 billion a year on these services (**"The Quarantine," 2020**). Those declining disc sales? They have been more than made up by **electronic sell-through (EST)**, the buying and downloading of digital movies that annually brings studios $2.6 billion (**Gingerich, 2020**). Falling music sales? American music fans more than made up for that decline by streaming 1.15 trillion tunes in 2019 (the first time that the number

exceeded 1 trillion; **Nielsen Music, 2020**); world-wide, 2020's 2.2 trillion music streams propelled the industry to over $20 billion in revenues (**"Year End," 2021**).

The sad state of the newspaper industry? Tumultuous times—both political and medical—have driven news readership to record levels. The *Wall Street Journal* has more than 2 million digital subscribers; the *New York Times* has more than 5.3 million total subscriptions across print and digital editions; papers across the country of all sizes are experiencing growing digital subscriptions, fewer cancellations, and increased page views and daily visits (**Benton, 2020**; **Doctor, 2020**). You can see the number of hours in a day a typical American adult spends with media in **Figure 2.1**.



Figure 2.1 Average Daily Time US Adults Spend with Media, 2020 (in hours/minutes).

Source: ***Dolliver, 2020***.

(Young woman using laptop) PhotoAlto/Matthieu Spohn/Getty Images; (Phone) Thomas Northcut/Photodisc/Getty Images; (Car key) Burazin/Photographer's Choice/Getty Images; (TV remote & CD disc) George Doyle & Ciaran Griffin/Getty Images; (Folded Newspaper) Fuse/ Getty Images

In fact, even before the coronavirus altered every aspect of our lives, we were watching more videos, listening to more music, reading more often, playing more video games, consuming more news, and accessing the Internet more often than ever before; we were simply doing it in new and different ways. For media industries, these facts offer good news—readers, viewers, and listeners are out there in ever-increasing numbers, and they value the mass communication experience. These data also offer good news for literate media consumers— their consumption choices will shape the media landscape to come and, inevitably, the mass communication process itself.

Changes in the Process of Mass Communication

Media industries face a number of challenges that promise to alter their relationship with their audiences. Concentration of media ownership and conglomeration can constrict the number and variety of voices available to audiences. Those audiences are becoming fragmented, potentially making it more difficult for media organizations to reach them. Globalization not only fragments the audience even more, but it can also make it less profitable for a media company to tailor its fare for its own homeland. Hypercommercialization might allow those companies to earn more income, but at what price to an audience awash in commercials? And fueling all this change is **convergence**—the erosion of traditional distinctions among media. As we've already seen, content typically associated with one medium is quite likely to be delivered by any number of other media; we, the **platform agnostic** audience members having no preference on which medium to consume content, seem quite content with that state of affairs.

Concentration of Ownership and Conglomeration

Ownership of media companies is increasingly concentrated in fewer and fewer hands. Through mergers, acquisitions, buyouts, and hostile takeovers, a very small number of large conglomerates is coming to own more and more of the world's media outlets. In the last few years, for example, telecommunication conglomerate AT&T acquired satellite TV provider DirecTV for $49 billion; cable company Charter Communications acquired Time Warner Cable for $57 billion; another telecom giant, Verizon, bought Yahoo! and its many Web brands (*TechCrunch, Huffington Post,* Flickr, and Tumblr, to name just a few) for nearly $5 billion; Viacom and CBS merged, creating a $28 billion-a-year company that marries Paramount Pictures and cable channels such as MTV, Nickelodeon, Comedy Central, and BET with the CBS broadcast network, cable channel Showtime, 28 owned-and-operated TV stations, streaming service Paramount+, and publisher Simon & Schuster; AT&T, the country's second-largest wireless carrier, paid $85 billion for the multinational media and entertainment conglomerate Time Warner and its holdings such as HBO, CNN, Bleacher Reports, DC Comics, and the Warner Bros. movie studio; and Disney bought 21st Century Fox for $71 billion, gaining movie studios Twentieth Century Fox, Fox Searchlight, Fox 2000, Twentieth Century Fox Television, the FX channels, and Fox 21. Media observer Ben Bagdikian reported that in 1997 the number of media corporations with "dominant power in society" was 10. Today five companies—Comcast, AT&T, Disney, ViacomCBS, and Sony—own the vast majority of "the most powerful companies in [our] lives, many of which don't offer products like cars and refrigerators, but rather services like cable TV and broadband Internet" (**Franken, 2017**, p. 342; **Littleton & Low, 2019**).

This **concentration of ownership** is more than an economic issue. It is a fundamental principle of our democracy that we have a right to information from a wide diversity of viewpoints so that we can make up our own minds. Democracy—rule by the people—requires an independent media. This is the crux of former associate justice of the Supreme Court Hugo Black's eloquent defense of a vibrant media in his 1945 *Associated Press et al. v. U.S.* decision: "The First Amendment rests on the assumption that the widest possible dissemination of information from diverse and antagonistic sources is essential to the

welfare of the public, that a free press is a condition of a free society." Closely related to concentration is **conglomeration**, the increase in the ownership of media outlets by larger, nonmedia companies. The threat is clear, explained Vermont senator Bernie Sanders:

> What you've got today . . . is about a half a dozen major media conglomerates that own and control the distribution of the information that the American people receive. That is a massive concentration of control. And what is never discussed about this is, What is the goal of these major media conglomerates? Is it to educate the American people? Is it to give the five sides of the issue? No. Their function as major media conglomerates, owned by very large financial interests, is to make as much money as they possibly can. . . . This is a disaster for democracy. (in **Smiley, 2016**)

But the conflict of interest between profit and public service is only one presumed problem with conglomeration. Another is the dominance of a bottom-line mentality and its inevitable degradation of media content. *Variety*'s **Peter Bart (2014)** explains that the "corporate giants" who own media companies are in a "race for consolidation [that] continues to accelerate, burying movies, magazines, books, and music under still more layers of corporate number-crunchers." Wall Street, he argues, favors risk-free companies, whether they are media outlets or supermarkets (p. 28). Bart was speaking of media in general.

As for journalism, Senator Sanders explains that the news "portrays politics as entertainment, and largely ignores the major crises facing our communities. . .As a general rule of thumb, the more important the issue is to large numbers of working people, the less interesting it is to the corporate media" (in **vanden Heuvel, 2019**).

Conglomeration also renders investigative journalism unwelcome, as **enterprise reporting,** stories written not from press releases, but those journalists discover on their own. These potentially-controversial stories pose the risk of litigation, lost advertising dollars, and angering the powerful. NBC News producer Rich McHugh confirmed, "If you speak to any reporter who has chased down a story, whether it be for a month or two to seven months, everybody has a version of their story getting killed" (in **Battaglio, 2019**).

Local news, in particular, has been diminished by corporate demand for profit. Only 164 full-time newspaper journalists now report on the bills, debates, possible corruption, and politicians in the nation's 50 state capitals (**Barber, 2014**). Only 21 of 50 states currently have even one daily newspaper reporter assigned to Washington, DC, to cover Congress (**Lu & Holcomb, 2016**).

This produces **news deserts**, areas starved for news vital to their existences, currently affecting more than 1,300 communities. Two hundred counties have no newspaper at all (**Brown, 2020**) and 900 have lost all local news coverage (all media) since 2004 (**Stites, 2018**). Local media were "always the engines that powered much of American journalism, as great local reporting would bubble up to the national newspapers and television," write journalists **Dan Rather and Elliot Kirschner (2018)**. They continue, "Local newspapers also provided a check on local and state governments, reporting on mayors, city councils, school boards, and statehouses. This is where much of the governing of the United States takes place, but a lot of it now occurs with little or no coverage."

A parallel product of concentrated ownership resides in **ghost papers**, once-prospering newspapers cut to bare bones in an effort to maximize profits, a state of affairs well-demonstrated by the *Ithaca Journal*. Located in upstate New York and one of the Gannett newspaper chain's 260 local papers, the daily has no locally based editor or publisher and only one reporter serving a town with 30,000 residents and another 30,000 students at Ithaca College. "Many" of Gannett's papers, admitted Amalie Nash, a company vice president, have 10 or fewer news staff, and "a lot" have five or fewer (in

Edmonds, 2020). Newspaper industry researcher Penny Muse Abernathy has identified about 1,000 ghost papers across the country; they are, she says, "newspaper in name only, a newspaper that still has a nameplate, but its reporting abilities are drastically diminished (in **Harris, 2020**).

Both news deserts and ghost papers pose a problem for the culture because there is social scientific evidence that local newspapers, those "little machines that spit out healthier democracies," in the words of media writer Joshua Benton, "increase voter turnout, reduce government corruption, make cities financially healthier, make citizens more knowledgeable about politics and more likely to engage with local government, force local TV to raise its game, encourage split-ticket (and thus less uniformly partisan) voting, and make elected officials more responsive and efficient" (2019). You can read about recent efforts to overcome the problem of news deserts in the box titled "Should the Government Subsidize Local Journalism?"

There are, however, positive observations on concentration and conglomeration. Many industry professionals argue that concentration and conglomeration are not only inevitable but necessary in a telecommunications environment that is increasingly fragmented and internationalized; companies must maximize their number of outlets to reach as much of the divided and far-flung audience as possible. If they do not, they will become financially insecure, and that is an even greater threat to free and effective mediated communication because advertisers and other well-monied forces will have increased influence over them.

Another defense of concentration and conglomeration has to do with **economies of scale**; that is, bigger can in fact sometimes be better because the relative cost of an operation's output declines as the size of that endeavor grows. For example, the cost of collecting the news or producing a television program does not increase significantly when that news report or television program is distributed over 2 outlets, 20 outlets, or 100 outlets. The additional revenues from these other points of distribution can then be plowed back into even better news and programming. In the case of conglomeration, the parallel argument is that revenues from a conglomerate's nonmedia enterprises can be used to support quality work by its media companies.

The potential impact of this **oligopoly**—a concentration of media industries into an eversmaller number of companies—on the mass communication process is enormous. What becomes of shared meaning when the people running communication companies are more committed to the financial demands of their corporate offices than they are to their audiences, who are supposedly their partners in the communication process? What becomes of the process itself when media companies grow more removed from those with whom they communicate? And what becomes of the culture that is dependent on that process when concentration and conglomeration limit the diversity of perspective and information? Or are the critics making too much of the issue? Is this unnamed manager of newspaper chain 10/30 Communications correct when he says, "Many companies in our industry have wrongly divided their focus among many customer groups. We do not. Our customer is the advertiser. Readers are our customers' customers" (in **Wemple, 2016**)?



CULTURAL FORUM

Should the Government Subsidize Local Journalism?

Given the central role journalism plays in supporting democracy, it is no surprise that the United States has a long history of a government-supported press. Journalist **Will Meyer (2018)** quotes media scholars Robert McChesney and John Nichols to explain that historically there was little disagreement as to whether or not the press should be subsidized, but rather how much it should be: "While there were rollicking disagreements about the character and content of the post-colonial press in America, the one universally accepted the premise was that the government needed to heavily subsidize the creation and development of the press if the constitutional system were to succeed." As a result, from the 1790s on, news publications enjoyed a subsidy in the form of reduced postal fees, by as much as 90%. Post offices and roads were improved expressly to increase the spread of newspapers and pamphlets, and governments at all levels were legally required to post (and pay for) official notices in local publications.

It was in this tradition that, in July 2018, New Jersey governor Phil Murphy approved legislation dedicating $5 million to his state's efforts to revive, strengthen, and transform local media. It created a Civic Information Consortium that invests "in valuable local-news coverage in parts of the state that have become news deserts and will elevate the voices of people of color and others who have been systematically ignored by many media outlets" (**Karr, 2020**).

The philosophy behind government subsidy of news is that if journalism is indeed a public service, people should fund it through their taxes. This seemingly radical idea entered the cultural forum as the coronavirus, with shuttered local businesses no longer advertising and historic levels of unemployment leaving people unable to spend, "ravaged anew" an already weakened local news infrastructure (**Tracy, 2020**).

Several ideas for government support, old and new, were debated. Among them was the reinstatement of the low-cost postal subsidy, dramatically slashed by the Postal Reorganization Act of 1970. Another was to impose a 2% tax on Google and Facebook advertising—a major factor in local journalism's sad economic state (Google alone makes about $5 billion a year from news stories produced by others; **Blethen, 2020**). This revenue would be used to establish a Local Free Press Fund. Another was granting generous tax credits to companies that sell their newspapers to non-profit organizations or mission-oriented for-profit operations (**Waldman, 2020**). A bipartisan group of 250 congresspeople proposed directing the federal government to allocate a specific amount of the ad budgets of its many branches to local media (**Eggerton, 2020**). There were also conversations about creating **community information districts (CiDs)**, much like water districts and fire safety districts, paid for through taxes or annual fees (about $40 per household per year), and designed to provide support for local journalism services in the geographic areas (districts) that fund them. A July 2020 national poll found significant support for this particular solution, with 62% of Americans expressing support for CiDs (**Kiefer, vGalperin, & Winter, 2020**).

Enter Your Voice

- Americans rarely want more government, especially in matters of the press, and few are happy paying more taxes, so what do you think of the idea of the government using public money to subsidize local news?
- Do you agree with journalist Jeff Jarvis who argued, "I see danger everywhere if government funds or in any way approves or interferes with journalism and speech," he said. "To accept funding from government, no matter the alleged safeguards, puts us at risk of mortal conflict of interest. Whom do we serve then? Need I say it? Follow the money" (in **Ingram, 2020**)? But doesn't all financial support, for example, from advertisers, come with the potential for conflicts of interest?
- How do you imagine your community might benefit from local journalism subsidized by the people rather than advertiser-supported local journalism? How might the type of coverage differ?



▲ News deserts threaten the democratic functioning of the press and democracy itself.

Marc Turcan/Shutterstock

Globalization

Closely related to the concentration of media ownership is **globalization**. It is large, multinational conglomerates that are doing the lion's share of media acquisitions. The potential impact of globalization on the mass communication process speaks to the issue of diversity of expression. Will distant, anonymous, foreign corporations, each with vast holdings in a variety of nonmedia businesses, use their power to shape news and entertainment content to suit their own ends?

Here in America, the concern is that media companies, with an eye toward an expanding worldwide market for their fare, will tailor their content to the widest possible global audience, ignoring story and character in their television shows and movies in favor of car chases and explosions. Foreign audiences understand big-time action and adventure; nuance and subtlety don't translate as well. Abroad, the

worry is that high-quality American media content will overwhelm local media industries and local cultures. As it is, almost every country in the world, including our friends in Canada, puts limits of some sort on the amount and type of US media content they allow across their borders.

There is, however, an alternative view to these concerns. Different people from different cultures can learn from one another through the exchange of their different media. Rather than fear the sharing of the stories we tell, we should embrace them. In addition, defenders of increased globalization point to the need to reach a fragmented and widespread audience—the same factor that fuels concentration—as encouraging this trend. They also cite the growing economic clout of emerging democracies (and the need to reach the people who live in them) and the increasing intertwining of the world's economies as additional reasons globalization is necessary for the economic survival of media businesses.

Audience Fragmentation

The nature of the other partner in the mass communication process is changing too. Individual segments of the audience are becoming more narrowly defined; the audience itself is less of a mass audience. This is **audience fragmentation**.

Before the advent of television, radio, and magazines were national media. Big national radio networks brought news and entertainment to the entire country. Magazines such as *Life*, *Look*, and the *Saturday Evening Post* once offered limited text and many pictures to a national audience. But television could do these things better: It was radio with pictures; it was magazines with motion. To survive, radio and magazines were forced to find new functions. No longer able to compete on a mass scale, these media targeted smaller audiences that were alike in some important characteristic and therefore more attractive to specific advertisers. So now we have magazines such as *Creative Scrapbooker* and *Brides*, and radio station formats such as Country, Urban, and Lithuanian. This phenomenon is known as **narrowcasting, niche marketing**, or **targeting**.

Technology has wrought the same effect on television. Before cable television, people could choose from among the three commercial broadcast networks—ABC, CBS, NBC—one noncommercial public broadcasting station, and, in larger markets, maybe an independent station or two. Now with cable, satellite, and Internet video streaming, people have literally millions of viewing options. The television audience has been fragmented. To attract advertisers, each channel now must find a more specific group of people to make up its viewership. For example, Nickelodeon targets kids, TV Land appeals to Baby Boomers, and HGTV seeks Millennial homeowners.

The new digital technologies promise even more audience fragmentation, almost to the point of audiences of one. For example, cable companies have the ability to send very specific commercials not only to specific neighborhoods but even to individual homes. Spotify inserts individually targeted commercials as listeners stream podcasts from its site, using a process called **streaming ad insertion** (**Carman, 2020**). And if you've ever used an Internet search engine, you know that the ads you see are specific to you based on the history of your overall Internet use. So, too, are the search results you're offered. **Zonecasting** technology allows radio stations to deliver different commercials to specific neighborhoods, and **location-based mobile advertising,** as you no doubt know well, lets marketers directly send ads targeted to you wherever you are in that moment.

But if these **addressable technologies**—technologies permitting the transmission of very specific content to equally specific audience members—are changing the nature of the mass media's audiences, then the

mass communication process itself must also change. What will happen as smaller, more specific audiences become better known to their partners, the media companies, in the process of making meaning? What will happen to the national culture that binds us as we become increasingly fragmented into demographically targeted **taste publics**—groups of people bound by little more than an interest in a given form of media content? Will there be a narrowing of our collective cultural experience as media's storytelling function is disrupted because we are each listening to stories we individually preselect or that are preselected for us? "Maybe one day," wonders *Creativity* magazine editor **Teressa Iezzi (2007)**, "you won't be able to say anything to anyone because a common language or the ability to grapple with or laugh at something outside of your comfort zone will have fallen away" (p. 11). National Public Radio's **Michael Oreskes (2016)** adds, "'Nichefication' may strengthen the business prospects of [individual media] companies, but it weakens their ability to serve the public." This is because *the public* is now *many publics* with many different interests in need of service.

There is an alternative view, however. Audiences may well be fragmenting, but the interactivity encouraged and facilitated by the digital media will reconnect and reconfigure us into more numerous, more robust, more varied communities. There is indeed a lot of conversation, curiosity, and sharing taking place on social networking sites such as Twitter and Instagram; yes, it can be small and juvenile, but very often it is passionate, informative, observant, clever, subversive, and maybe even community-building.

Hypercommercialism

The costs involved in acquiring numerous or large media outlets, domestic and international, and of reaching an increasingly fragmented audience must be recouped somehow. Selling more advertising on existing and new media and identifying additional ways to combine content and commercials are the two most common strategies. This leads to **hypercommercialism**. The rise in the number of commercial minutes in a typical television show is evident to most viewers, as nearly 20 of every 60 minutes of network and cable television time is devoted to nonprogramming content (**Friedman, 2018**). Hypercommercialization has hit the Internet as well, as you surely know as you try to separate the brand tweets from those of the real people you follow on Twitter and work to block the endless commercials on your Facebook news feed.

The sheer growth in the amount of advertising is one troublesome aspect of hypercommercialism. But for many observers, the increased mixing of commercial and noncommercial media content is even more troubling. Of course, not everyone has a problem with this practice. Angela Courtin, chief marketing officer of movie and television studio Relativity Media, explains, "We have come to an intersection of media and content where marketing is content and content is marketing" (in **Downey, 2015**).

But what do you think of these "intersections"? If you are a fan of the Hallmark Channel's holiday movies you may have learned how to set up a Balsam Hill synthetic Christmas tree, how to set its remote-control lights, and how to bake cookies with a foldaway Ninja Food oven. The three kids on *Young Sheldon* routinely enjoy Jimmy Dean breakfast sausage, Count Chocula cereal, Dairy Queen cookie dough Blizzards, and Red Vines licorice. Dunkin' drink cups are never far from the camera in *America's Got Talent,* and Lay's snacks appear in every episode of Snapchat's reality show *Endless*.

But at least subscription streaming services are commercial-free, yes? No. Every single original program on Amazon Prime contains paid product placements; so does 91% of Hulu's original content and 74% of Netflix's (**Weprin, 2018**). For example, if you watch Netflix's *Stranger Things* you watch brands like the Chicago Cubs, BMX bikes, Coke, Swatch, Vuarnets, Nike, Chucks, Baskin-Robbins, Levis, Burger King, JC Penny, Orange Julius, and Gap.



▲ Rarely off-screen, the real star of *America's Got Talent* was for several seasons Dunkin' Donuts.

NBC/Photofest

The global product placement business is worth $20.5 billion a year, more than half, $11.6 billion, in the US alone (**Friedman, 2020a**). So ubiquitous has this **product placement**—the integration, for a fee, of specific branded products into media content—become that the Writers Guild of America demands additional compensation for writing what are, in effect, commercials. The producers' response is that product placement is not a commercial; rather, it represents a new form of content, **brand entertainment**—when brands are, in fact, part of and essential to the program. Toyota, Kraft Foods, Chase credit cards, and Cigna insurance are recurring "characters" on *Top Chef*. Musical artists not only take payment to include brands in their songs, but some, for example, Mariah Carey, also now integrate brands into their CD booklets. Music channel Vevo retroactively inserts products into already existing music videos. Celebrities like Kylie Jenner and Ariana Grande (more than $1 million per post) and Cristiano Ronaldo and Selena Gomez (more than $900,000 per post) accept payments from brands to include their wares in their social media posts (**Conklin, 2020**). There are branded podcasts (for example Blue Apron's *Why We Eat What We Eat* and *The Sauce* from McDonald's), and many e-books come not only with products integrated into their storylines but also with links to the sponsors' websites.

Sometimes hypercommercialism involves direct payments of cash in exchange for exposure rather than "mere" branding. Many radio stations now accept payment from record promoters to play their songs, an activity once illegal and called **payola**. It is now quite acceptable as long as the "sponsorship" is acknowledged on the air.

Again, as with globalization and concentration, where critics see damage to the integrity of the media themselves and disservice to their audiences, defenders of hypercommercialism argue that it is simply the economic reality of today's media world.

Convergence: Erosion of Distinctions among Media

Movie studios make their titles available not only on DVD and EST but for handheld videogame systems as well. Cable's AMC runs a slate of **webisodes**, Web-only television shows, to accompany its hit series *The Walking Dead.* Satellite provider Dish Network offers interactive, TV remote–based play of classic video games. Magazines *Allure* and *Vanity Fair* maintain digital video channels and produce their own television shows. It may be a smartphone, but it's also a camera . . . sales of digital cameras have dropped 87% since 2010 (**Richter, 2020**). Video-game consoles don't just let players download movies and television shows, surf the Internet, check their social media accounts, and tune in to the Weather Channel and the BBC; they also offer streaming of tens of thousands of feature films. You can subscribe to *National Geographic* and play its issue-matched video game online or on a smartphone. There are tens of thousands of US commercial, noncommercial, and foreign radio stations delivering their broadcasts online.

You can read *The New York Times* or *Time* magazine and hundreds of other newspapers and magazines on a variety of screens. And what can "newspapers, magazines, and books," "radio and recordings," and "television and film" really mean (or more accurately, *really be*) now that we can access digital texts, audio, and moving images virtually anyplace, anytime via **Wi-Fi** (wireless Internet) and handheld devices? This erosion of distinctions among media is called *convergence*, and it has been fueled by three related phenomena that have overwhelmed the mass communication process all at once. First is the digitization of almost all content, making it possible to transmit and share information across all platforms. Second is the increasing data speed of both wired and wireless networks, making access to that digitized content fast, easy, and seamless. Third are the remarkably fast and ongoing advances in communication technology that make once-unimagined ideas quite possible.

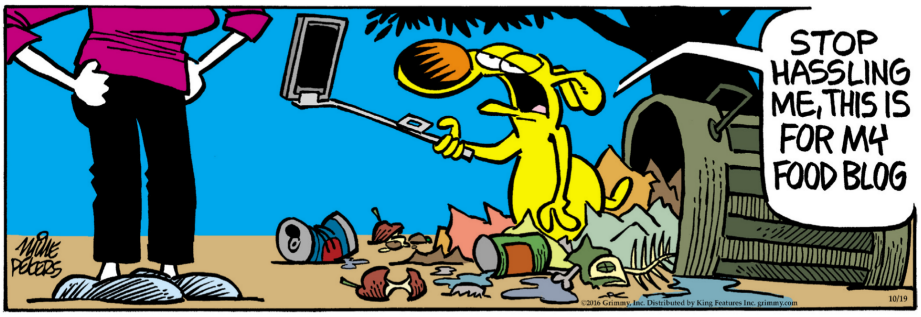
The traditional lines between media are disappearing. Concentration is one reason for this convergence. If one company owns newspapers, an online service, television stations, book publishers, a magazine or two, and a film company, it has a strong incentive to get the greatest use from its content, whether news, education, or entertainment, by using as many channels of delivery as possible. The industry calls this **synergy,** and it is the driving force behind several recent mergers and acquisitions in the media and telecommunications industries. In 2012 Facebook bought photo-sharing platform Instagram for $1 billion specifically to gain access to its app-based mobile services and to make its Facebook offerings more visual, therefore increasing the site's value to advertisers. In 2018 radio giant Sirius XM spent $3.5 billion for music streaming company Pandora. In 2014 Apple, also deciding that the future of music was streaming, paid $3.2 billion for the headphone and music streaming company Beats Music. That same year YouTube, wanting to bring real-time video gameplay to its already massive array of channels, paid more than $1 billion for the game-streaming service Twitch. In 2015, Activision paid nearly $6 billion for King Digital Entertainment in order to move its console-bound games such as *Call of Duty* and *World of Warcraft* to more mobile platforms where King, with hits such as *Candy Crush*, was dominant.



▲ Convergence killed the video store, victimized by video downloads, streaming, and online rentals—products of the convergence of movies, video, and the Internet. Convergence is strangling the bookstore as well, victimized by downloads and portable e-readers, smartphones, and tablets—products of the convergence of print, the Internet, and smartphones.

(DVD Express and Borders store): Susan Baran

A second reason for convergence is audience fragmentation. A mass communicator who finds it difficult to reach the whole audience can reach its component parts through various media. A third reason is the audience itself. We are increasingly platform agnostic, having no preference for where we access our media content. Will this expansion and blurring of traditional media channels confuse audience members, further tilting the balance of power in the mass communication process toward the media industries? Or will it give audiences more power—power to choose, power to reject, and power to combine information and entertainment in individual ways?



▾ Convergence and the low cost of entry have made us all authors.

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DEVELOPING MEDIA LITERACY SKILLS

Making Our Way in the Meme Culture

At the end of his 1967 book *The Selfish Gene,* noted evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins introduced the term *meme.* He likened memes to genes: "Memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation" (in **Staley, 2019**, p. 14). He continued his analogy, arguing that, like genes, memes compete with each other for limited resources; memes compete for attention, because without attention they cease to be. And while he was speaking of any idea that spreads from person to person in a culture, he came to accept the Internet-based meaning of **meme**, an online idea or image that is repeatedly copied, manipulated, and shared.

For Professor Dawkins, memes are how ideas come into being, are propagated, and (if they survive) serve their host, the culture in which they flourish. But what of Internet memes specifically? Critics of meme culture argue that the ideas most likely to be spread—go viral—are the ones most guaranteed to attract attention. So we spend (or possibly waste) time on epic fail videos and funny cat pictures with oddly spelled slogans (the I Can Has Cheezburger Meme network has hundreds of millions of page and video views each month).

But maybe we aren't wasting time. Maybe we're building community by creating, viewing, and sharing ideas; on Instagram, for example, memes are 7 times more likely to be shared than non-meme content (**Mezrahi, 2019**). "Memes help people speak truths," writes technologist Jay Owens (2019). Memes are "iterative and quotable. That is how the meme functions, through reference to the original context and memes that have come before, coupled with creative remixing to speak to a particular audience, topic, or moment. Each new instance of a meme is thereby automatically familiar and recognizable."

Memes are unlike the traditional media that carry cultural ideas, bound as they are by economic and ethical considerations. As a result, argues tech writer Joan Donovan, as memes "are shared they shed the context of their creation, along with their authorship. Unmoored from the trappings of an author's reputation or intention, they become the collective property of the

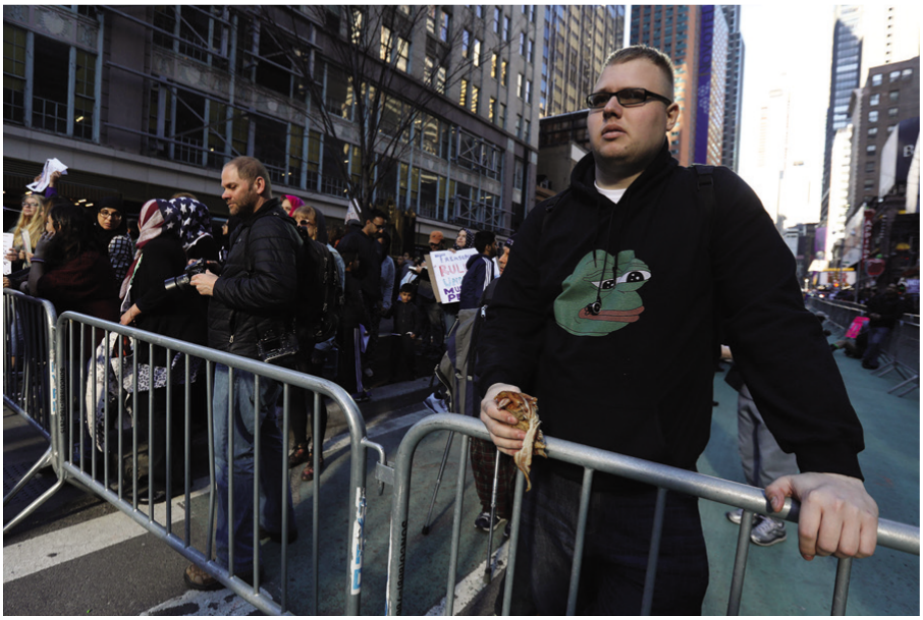
culture. As such, memes take on a life of their own, and no one has to answer for transgressive or hateful ideas" (2019). As such, hateful, racist, and misogynistic memes flourish on the Internet, often weaponized into **meme wars,** the use of images, slogans, and video for political purposes, typically employing disinformation and half-truths.

White supremacists utilize meme culture to spread their messages widely. For example, the so-called Boogaloo Bois, a dangerous far-Right militia intent on fomenting race war in America, are "loosely bound together by anti-government and pro-gun sentiment and memes . . . Like many other fringe groups, the Boogaloo's memes create a playful atmosphere that makes them approachable despite their extremism" (**Ellis, 2020**). Likewise, explained technology writer Abby Ohlheiser, in addition to pillaging and looting "the People's House," engaging in sedition, and brawling with police, killing one officer, the Donald Trump supporters, including a large Boogaloo Bois contingent, who invaded the US Capitol in January 2021 in an effort to block Congress from confirming Joe Biden's presidential win, were "having fun doing memes in the halls of American democracy" (2021).

Still, the most identifiable take-over of a meme by a hateful ideology involves Pepe the Frog. The Pepe the Frog cartoon, originally created in 2005 by artist Matt Furie and a hit meme subject on its own for years, was appropriated by white nationalists in 2016. Used in this racist manner, Pepe was declared a hate symbol by the Anti-Defamation League. Sufficiently dismayed by its vile use, Furie killed off Pepe in 2017, and then resurrected him in an attempt to regain control of his creation. He failed, as racists and anti-Semites continue to "own" Pepe (**Rivera, 2020**). The dark side of memes is that once they are in the culture, no one can control their use.

Memes survive because *we* spread them. They attract our attention, and we share them to attract the attention of others. But maybe this is how it should be in our new era of mass communication. We now have the opportunity to express ourselves, however seriously or frivolously, to offer our own point of view, however well-founded or off-the-wall, all without someone else vetting us. It makes us feel that what we have to say matters. This is the Internet's great gift to mass communication. But it is also its greatest challenge. What do we do with this immense freedom and the power it grants each of us?

As a media-literate individual, you understand and respect the power of media messages and you know that media content is a text providing insight into our culture and our lives. So the choice is yours: How will you use the Internet and social media? Memes are easy and fun; you are free to create and share them, to have a laugh, to skewer or honor. But the Internet and social media are also sites for more meaningful personal and cultural expression. You are free to undertake that more valuable, if a bit more difficult, work. What will you do? This question and some answers run throughout this text; the lessons you draw from what you read will be your own.



Pepe the Frog: The meme that put a gentler face on the hate and ignorance of white supremacy.

CARLO ALLEGRI/REUTERS/Alamy Stock Photo

MEDIA LITERACY CHALLENGE

The Fraction of Selection

An important part of being media literate is *having critical thinking skills that enable you to develop independent judgments about media and media content.* Challenge your own skill by predicting which media will survive and which will disappear as a result of the dramatic technological, economic, and audiencepreference turmoil currently shaking the traditional media industries. Which will change and how? The answers depend on you and your media choices. In 1954, when television was doing to movies, newspapers, magazines, and radio what the Internet and smartphones are doing to today's media, communication scholar Wilbur Schramm created the *fraction of selection* to answer the question "What determines which offerings of mass communication will be selected by a given individual?" It looks like this:

$$\frac{\text{Expectation of Reward}}{\text{Effort Required}}$$

It suggests that you weigh the level of reward you expect from a given medium or piece of content against how much effort—in the broadest sense—you make to secure that reward. Now, consider your own media consumption. For example, how do you typically

watch movies: at the theater, streamed, downloaded, on disc, wait for them to come to cable? What “data” would go in your numerator? In your denominator? Create your personal formula for other media consumption as well. News on the Internet versus the newspaper? Popular music on commercial radio versus streamed from the Internet? Compare your outcomes with those of your friends. Based on your results, can you speculate on tomorrow’s media winners and losers?

Making Our Way in the Meme Culture

At the end of his 1967 book *The Selfish Gene,* noted evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins introduced the term *meme.* He likened memes to genes: "Memes propagate them- selves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation" (in **Staley, 2019**, p. 14). He continued his analogy, arguing that, like genes, memes compete with each other for limited resources; memes compete for attention, because without attention they cease to be. And while he was speaking of any idea that spreads from person to person in a culture, he came to accept the Internet- based meaning of **meme**, an online idea or image that is repeatedly copied, manipulated, and shared.

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Introduction to Chapter 3

About This Chapter

This chapter introduces the oldest and arguably most influential of our mass mediums: books. Books are a fascinating medium, not only because of their history and importance, but because they are always such a hot topic of conversation. It is quite common to hear reports that the book industry is dying or in decline, but books are generating more money in sales than ever before. There is a lot to talk about when it comes to books, their history, their popularity, and the economic and cultural structures that surround them.

WHAT TO FOCUS ON

For this chapter, generally speaking, focus more on history, ideas, and facts than on the minutiae of the book industry. Pay attention to everything in this introduction, of course, but also to the section of the chapter on the history of books and printing. Focus on the history of book printing in the U.S., and how it has varied over the years. Pay attention to the value of books, and on the general scope and nature of the book industry. Focus on the overall trends and scale of convergence and concentration of ownership in this part of the media sector.

Introductory Information About Books

Focus on Critical Thinking: Who Invented the Printing Press?

The story of printing and the history of books that gets told in the United States and much of the West usually starts with a man named **Johannes Gutenberg** (more about him in the upcoming chapter), who is often credited with inventing the printing press. Gutenberg invented the movable type printing press in Germany in the middle of the 1400s, the story goes, and books rapidly spread throughout all of Europe, paving the way for modernity. Like so many things in history, however, what we actually know is a lot more complicated than the story we end up telling. So let's clear some things up.

The history of printing is ancient, not modern. Over 5,000 years ago, around 3100 BCE, the Sumerians (living in modern-day Iraq and Kuwait) were using printing tools to create symbols in clay using a writing system known as **cuneiform**. The Sumerians produced a series of poems called **The Epic of Gilgamesh** around 2100 BCE, which is widely considered to be the oldest piece of epic literature. As the centuries passed, various forms of paper, ink, and printing tools were developed independently around the ancient world, although there was unquestionably some intermixing of methods and technologies through trade.

There are two pieces of print-related technology that are important to explain to better understand the development of the printing press. The first of these is **block printing**. This is a method of printing that is achieved by creating blocks (whether literal wood blocks or "blocks" made of other materials) that have raised surfaces at the top forming a pattern of some kind—an image, a letter, a word, a symbol, or so on. These raised surfaces are covered in ink, then paper (or the equivalent) is pressed onto them to create a reversed image on the page. The easiest way to picture block printing is to imagine a rubber stamp. Early block printing examples from China are usually pictures of things like flowers, rather than text, and entire images were carved into a single wood block. As time went on, block printing evolved into **movable type**, where text is broken down into individual components (like letters, numbers, spaces, punctuation, and so on) and carved into smaller, individual blocks. These blocks are then moved around and assembled into words, sentences, paragraphs, pages, and so on. The power of movable type is that it gives printers the ability to assemble and reassemble premade blocks into many different pages of text. In other words, instead of single wood blocks that might contain a cohesive image or a single page of text, movable type lets printers create an almost infinite number of different pages using a limited library of smaller blocks.

It has long been acknowledged by scholars that printing presses were in use in China throughout the 7th Century CE, some 800 years before Gutenberg. Although these Chinese presses used large wood blocks instead of movable type, their block printing technology produced some very important texts. One of these early works was **The Diamond Sutra**, "acknowledged as the oldest dated printed book in existence."[1] The Sutra itself is a 17-anda-half-foot-long scroll that contains a sacred Mahayana Buddhist text. It was not until 1041 CE that moveable type came into use in China with the advent of individual characters and words made from baked clay, but that was still 400 years before Gutenberg. Around 1250 CE, 150 years before Gutenberg's birth, Korean artisans printed a book of

Buddhist teachings using metal moveable type—so Gutenberg was certainly not the first person to develop a printing press using metal movable type.

So why do so many sources credit Gutenberg with the invention of the printing press? Some of the answer has to do with the tendency of Western scholars to ignore the rest of the world and credit their own cultures with every important historical advance. But it is also true that we just don't know that much about Gutenberg and how he developed his press. To the best of our knowledge, Gutenberg didn't leave any notes at all about his own work. We know so little about Gutenberg and the circumstances surrounding his work on the printing press that we've had to scrape together our knowledge from legal documents and other second-hand accounts and references. That leaves us with many important questions. Did Gutenberg invent his own printing technology entirely by himself, or was he influenced by the work that had been going on in Asia for centuries prior to his career as a printer?

Because there is no direct historical evidence to answer this question one way or the other, many historians choose to assume that there was no such connection between Gutenberg and Chinese and Korean printers. Author and publishing historian Thomas Christensen, however, suggests an alternative interpretation of the evidence:

> What is certain, however, is that printing with movable wooden type is documented from the eleventh century; that printing with movable metal type had been an active enterprise in Korea since 1234; that other printing technologies had Asian origins and were subsequently transmitted to the West; that a single empire (the Mongol khanates) stretched from Korea to Europe through much of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, facilitating cross-cultural exchange across a vast region; that there was considerable East–West travel, contact, and exchange during this period; that the written record of such contacts records only a fraction of what actually occurred; and that there was awareness of Asian printing in Europe in the centuries before Gutenberg.[2]

Because it seems likely that Asian printing technologies would have behaved like so many other technologies during this period—that they would have passed to Europe through trade and cultural exchange—Christensen concludes "it is likely that Europe's print revolution did not occur independently but was influenced or inspired by similar printing in Asia."[3]

In other words, it seems questionable that Gutenberg would have grown up in a part of Germany where knowledge of Asian printing was widespread, that he would have gotten interested in working in the field of printing that was already heavily influenced by trade with Asia, and that he would have developed his own printing press from scratch—all without knowing anything about the world's most advanced existing printing technology. As critical thinkers, we should question the commonplace assertion that Gutenberg invented the printing press. Journalist M. Sophia Newman puts it more bluntly, arguing that the "fantastical idea that Gutenberg alone invented the printing press ignores an entire continent and several centuries of relevant efforts and makes no effort to understand how or why technology might have spread."[4]

SO WHAT EXACTLY DID GUTENBERG DO?

It is not necessary to think of Gutenberg as some independent super-genius who created the printing press out of thin air to recognize the importance of his contribution to the history of printing and books. **It is best to think of Gutenberg as the inventor of a printing system or process** that included a new press design, high-quality ink, and a new metal alloy that made the mass-production of metal movable type much easier and cheaper. These innovations certainly paved the way for the spread and popularization of printing press technology throughout Europe. Gutenberg's work also arrived at a

time when there was a strong demand in Europe for more written material, and the printers who followed Gutenberg took advantage of that demand by producing texts that appealed to a large population of readers. Gutenberg himself, however, was never the recipient of great riches due to his inventions. He lost his lab in a law suit to a man named **Johann Fust**, who had lent Gutenberg the money he needed to print his famous Bibles. In fact, the first printed book in Europe to contain the name of its printer cites Fust and Gutenberg's former employee Peter Schöffer as the responsible parties. It is unclear how much, if any, printing Gutenberg did after the run of Bibles was completed, and he died in 1468, around 13 years after their completion.

There is widespread debate among scholars about how we should view the impact of the printing press. From our current perspective, it is tempting to look back and say that printing technology quickly created the basis for much of what we consider to be modern culture. However, printing press technology did not suddenly and completely replace all previous forms of communication, even in Europe. In other words, "oral culture did not terminate with the invention of writing implements, nor was manuscript culture instantly toppled by the assimilation of printing techniques pioneered by Johannes Gutenberg and his successors."[5]

It is probably more accurate to say that printing technology was only one part of a much larger constellation of historical changes that slowly led to the modern world.

What to Study

KEY WORDS

Cuneiform

The Epic of Gilgamesh

The Diamond Sutra

Block printing

Moveable type

Literacy

The Whole Book of Psalms

The Stamp Act

Common Sense

Dime novels/pulp novels

Censorship

Illiteracy and Aliteracy

E-publishing

Disintermediation

Imprints

IMPORTANT PEOPLE

Johannes Gutenberg

Johann Fust

Ben Franklin's (importance to colonial publishing)

Thomas Paine

QUESTIONS YOU SHOULD BE ABLE TO ANSWER

- How long have humans been using written symbols? How long have humans been using printing technology and what culture did that technology arise in?
- When and where were block printing, movable type, the printing press, and movable metal type first invented?
- Did Gutenberg invent the printing press? Movable metal type?
- What is our best guess about the Asian influence on Gutenberg?
- What did Gutenberg actually contribute to the history of printing?

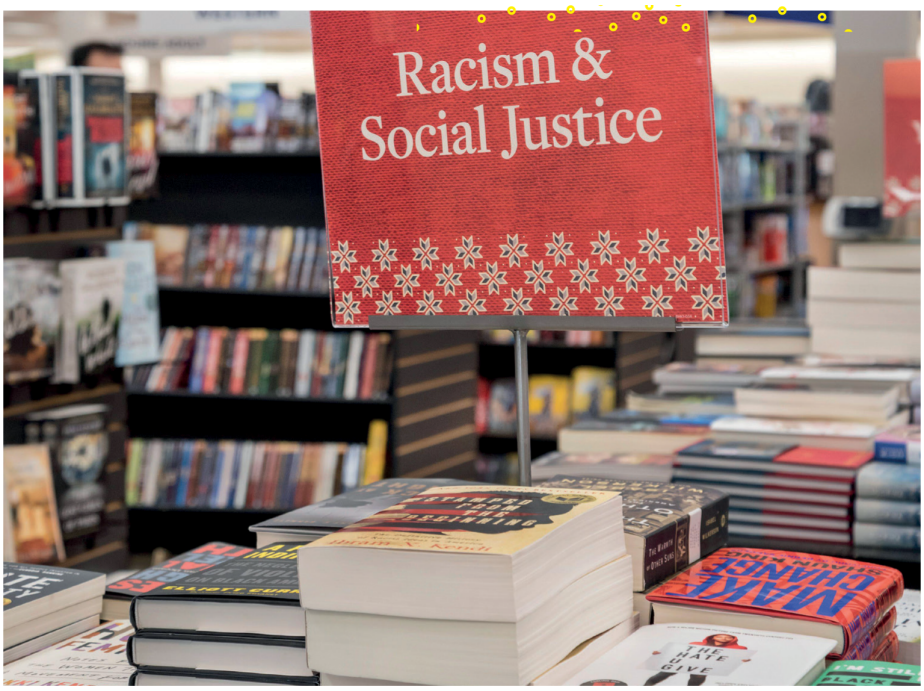
- What happened to Gutenberg after he printed the Gutenberg Bibles?
- What was the impact of the printing press?
- What were the reasons books weren't central to the lives of early American colonists?
- When did printing begin in the American colonies, and what was being printed? What was the first book printed in the colonies?
- What were the purposes of the Stamp Act? What happened to the Act and why?
- What caused book popularity in the U.S. to grow, and when did that happen?
- Why have books traditionally been seen as a powerful cultural force?
- What is Americans' most common communal cultural activity? How many times per year does the average American visit a library?
- Why is aliteracy considered to be a type of censorship?
- Roughly what percentage of Americans read a book of any kind in an average year? Is the percentage of non-readers going up or down over time?
- What are the statistics about how many books Americans read and how much money that generates?
- What are the Big 5 publishing companies, and why are they important? How many book publishers are there in the United States?
- What are the statistics regarding Amazon's market share in various parts of the book industry?
- What does scholarly research tell us about the link between reading literary fiction and developing empathy?

NOTES

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3. Christensen, p. 41.
4. Newman, M. Sophia. "So, Gutenberg Didn't Actually Invent Printing As We Know It." *Literary Hub,* 19 June 2019, **https://lithub.com/so-gutenberg-didnt-actually-invent-the-printing-press/**.
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Books

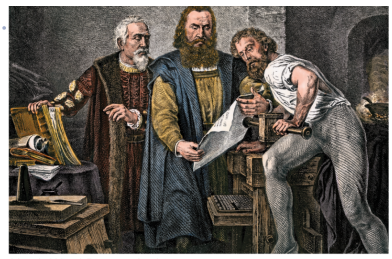
3



As America was rocked by massive protests over police brutality in the summer of 2020, books on racism and social justice enriched a necessary cultural conversation and helped sow the seeds of change.

Pat Canova/Alamy Stock Photo

1456 ▶ First Gutenberg Bible

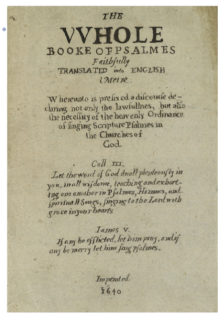


North Wind Picture Archives

1600

1638 First printing press in the colonies

1644 ▶ *The Whole Booke of Psalms*, first book printed in the colonies



THE
WHOLE
BOOKE OF PSALMES
Faithfully
TRANSLATED into ENGLISH
METRE

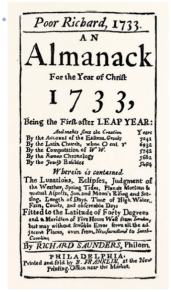
Library of Congress Rare Books and Special Collections Division [BS1440 .B4 1640]

1700

1732 ▶ *Poor Richard's Almanack*

1765 Stamp Act

1774 Thomas Paine writes *Common Sense*



Poor Richard, 1733.
AN
Almanack
For the Year of Christ
1733,
Being the First after LEAP YEAR:
By RICHARD SAUNDERS, Philom.
PHILADELPHIA

Universal History Archive/ UIG/Getty Images

1800

~**1800** Continuous roll paper

1807 John Wiley & Sons established

1811 Steam-powered printing press

1817 Harper Brothers established

1830 Improved pulp making

1852 Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*

1860 Dime novels appear

1861 US achieves highest literacy rate in the world

1884 Linotype machine

1885 Offset lithography

1900

1926 Book of the Month Club begins

1935 Penguin Books (first paperbacks) established in London

1939 Pocket Books (paperbacks) established in the US

1953 ▶ Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*



TCD/Prod.DB/Alamy Stock Photo

1960 Paperback sales surpass hardback sales for the first time

1995 Amazon.com goes online

2000

2000 First in-book paid product placement

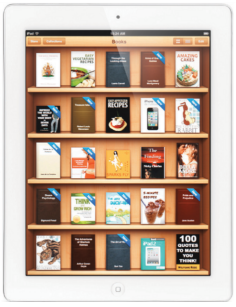
2003 Project Gutenberg and *Search Inside the Book* debut

2007 Final *Harry Potter* book; Amazon's Kindle

2008 On-demand titles exceed number of traditional titles

2009 For first time, Amazon sells more e-books than hard-copy books in one day (Christmas Day) Little Free Libraries launched

2010 ▶ iPad



Oleksiy Maksymenko Photography/Alamy Stock Photo

2011 E-books outsell all print books on Amazon

2017 Annual number of self-published books surpasses 1 million

2018 Audiobooks become publishing's fastest growing sector

2020 Coronavirus in the US; libraries become "second responders;" sales of books on racism soar; literacy declared a Constitutional right

YOU JUST WALKED INTO A ROOM WHERE YOUR FRIENDS ARE ENJOYING A MOVIE YOU'VE NEVER SEEN BEFORE.

So there you are, watching an arresting scene from HBO's adaptation of Ray Bradbury's 1953 science fiction classic *Fahrenheit 451*.

At first, you can't make out what is happening. There are several people in a barn who seem to be talking to themselves. You recognize actor Michael B. Jordan from *Black Panther*, but the other performers are completely unfamiliar. You stay with the scene. It's dark, and there's a bird. A young man quietly recites some prose. Before you can figure out what it all means, the movie ends.

Moved by the film, the next day you download the e-book to your tablet, and you eventually discover that these people aren't just mumbling to themselves; they're memorizing books. In this near-future society, all books have been banned by the authorities, forcing book lovers into hiding. They hold the books in their

heads because to hold them in their hands is a crime. If discovered with books, people are jailed and the books are set afire— Fahrenheit 451 is the temperature at which book paper will burst into flames, according to Bradbury.

Bradbury's main character, Guy Montag, a firefighter who until this moment had been an official book burner himself, speaks a line that stays with you. After he watches an old woman burn to death with her forbidden volumes, he implores his ice-cold, drugged, and television-deadened wife to understand what he is only then realizing. He pleads with her to see: "There must be something in books, things we can't imagine, to make a woman stay in a burning house; there must be something there" (pp. 49–50).

In this chapter, we examine the history of books, especially in terms of their role in the development of the United States. We discuss the importance that has traditionally been ascribed to books, as well as the scope and nature of the book industry. We address the various factors that shape the contemporary economics and structures of the book industry, examining at some length the impact of convergence, concentration, and hypercommercialism on the book industry and its relationship with its readers. Finally, we discuss the media literacy issues inherent in the wild success of the *Harry Potter* books.

A Short History of Books

As detailed in **Chapter 1**, the use of Gutenberg's printing press spread rapidly throughout Europe in the last half of the 15th century. But the technological advances and the social, cultural, and economic conditions necessary for books to become a major mass medium were three centuries away. As a result, it was a printing press and a book industry much like those of Gutenberg's time that first came to the New World in the 17th century.



In the now not-so-distant future of *Fahrenheit 451*, to own a book is illegal. Some people would rather die than do without.

TCD/Prod.DB/Alamy Stock Photo

Books Come to Colonial North America

The earliest colonists came to America primarily for two reasons: to escape religious persecution and to find economic opportunities unavailable to them in Europe. So, most of the books they carried with them to the New World were religiously oriented. Moreover, they brought very few books at all. Better-educated, wealthier Europeans were secure at home. Those willing to make the dangerous journey tended to be poor, uneducated, and largely illiterate.

There were other reasons early settlers did not find books central to their lives. One was the simple fight for survival. In the brutal and hostile land to which they had come, leisure for reading books was a luxury for which they had little time. People worked from sunrise to sunset just to live. If there were to be reading, it would have to be at night, and it was folly to waste precious candles on something as unnecessary to survival as reading. In addition, books and reading were regarded as symbols of wealth and status and therefore not priorities for people who considered themselves to be pioneers, servants of the Lord, or anti-English colonists. The final reason the earliest settlers were not active readers was the lack of portability of books. Books were heavy, and few were carried across the ocean. Those volumes that did make it to North America were extremely expensive and not available to most people.

The first printing press arrived on North American shores in 1638, only 18 years after the Plymouth Rock landing. It was operated by a company called Cambridge Press. Printing was limited to religious and government documents. The first book printed in the colonies appeared in 1644—*The Whole Booke of Psalms,* sometimes referred to as the *Bay Psalm Book.* Among the very few secular titles were those printed by Benjamin Franklin 90 years later. *Poor Richard's Almanack,* which first appeared in 1732, sold 10,000 copies annually. The *Almanack* contained short stories, poetry, weather predictions, and other facts and figures useful to a population more in command of its environment than those first settlers. As the colonies grew in wealth and sophistication, leisure time increased, as did affluence and education. Franklin also published the first true novel printed in North America, *Pamela*, written by English author Samuel Richardson. Still, by and large, books were religiously oriented or pertained to official government activities such as tax rolls and the pronouncements of various commissions.

The primary reason for this lack of variety was the requirement that all printing be done with the permission of the colonial governors. Because these men were invariably loyal to King George II, secular printing and criticism of the British Crown or even of local authorities were never authorized, and publication of such writing meant jail. Many printers were imprisoned— including Franklin's brother James—for publishing what they believed to be the truth.

The printers went into open revolt against official control in March 1765 after passage of the Stamp Act. Designed by England to recoup money it spent waging the French and Indian War, the Stamp Act mandated that all printing—legal documents, books, magazines, and news-papers—be done on paper stamped with the government's seal. Its additional purpose was to control and limit expression in the increasingly restless colonies. This affront to their freedom, and the steep cost of the tax—sometimes doubling the price of a publication—was simply too much for the colonists. The printers used their presses to run accounts of antitax protests, demonstrations, riots, sermons, boycotts, and other antiauthority activities, further fueling revolutionary sympathies. In November 1765, when the tax was to take effect, the authorities were so cowed by the reaction of the colonists that they were unwilling to enforce it.

Poor Richard, 1733.

AN

Almanack

For the Year of Chriſt

1733,

Being the Firſt after LEAP YEAR:

And makes ſince the Creation	Years
By the Account of the Eaſtern *Greeks*	7241
By the Latin Church, when ♎ ent. ♈	6932
By the Computation of *W. W.*	5742
By the *Roman* Chronology	5682
By the *Jewiſh* Rabbies	5494

Wherein is contained

The Lunations, Eclipſes, Judgment of the Weather, Spring Tides, Planets Motions & mutual Aſpects, Sun and Moon's Riſing and Setting. Length of Days, Time of High Water, Fairs, Courts, and obſervable Days

Fitted to the Latitude of Forty Degrees and a Meridien of Five Hours Weſt from *London*, but may without ſenſible Error ſerve all the adjacent Places, even from *Newfoundland* to *South-Carolina*,

By *RICHARD SAUNDERS*, Philom.

PHILADELPHIA.
Printed and ſold by *B. FRANKLIN*, at the New Printing-Office near the Market.

▲ First published in 1732, Benjamin Franklin's *Poor Richard's Almanack* offered readers a wealth of information for the upcoming year.

Universal History Archive/UIG/Getty Images

Anti-British sentiment reached its climax in the mid-1770s, and books were at its core. Short books, or pamphlets, motivated and coalesced political dissent. In 1774 England's right to govern the colonies was openly challenged by James Wilson's *Considerations on the Nature and Extent of the Legislative Authority of the British Parliament*, John Adams's *Novanglus Papers*, and Thomas Jefferson's *A Summary View of the Rights of British America.* Most famous of all was Thomas Paine's 47-page *Common Sense.* It sold 120,000 copies in the first three months after its release to a total population of 400,000 adults. Between 1776 and 1783, Paine also wrote a series of pamphlets called *The American Crisis. Common Sense* and *The American Crisis* made Paine the most widely read colonial author during the American Revolution.

THE EARLY BOOK INDUSTRY

After the Revolutionary War, printing became even more central to political, intellectual, and cultural life in major cities like Boston, New York, and Philadelphia. To survive financially, printers also operated as booksellers, book publishers, and sometimes as postmasters who sold stationery and even groceries. A coffeehouse or tavern often was attached to the print shop. The era was alive with political change, and print shops and bookshops became clearinghouses for the collection, exchange, and dissemination of information.



▲ British-born writer, patriot, and revolutionary leader Thomas Paine wrote *Common Sense* and *The American Crisis* to rally his colonial compatriots in their struggle against the British.

Library of Congress Prints & Photographs Division [LC-USZ62-46915]

The US newspaper industry grew rapidly from this mix, as detailed in **Chapter 4**. The book industry, however, was slower to develop. Books were still expensive, often costing the equivalent of a working person's weekly pay, and literacy remained a luxury. However, due in large measure to a movement begun before the Civil War, compulsory education had come to most states by 1900. This swelled the

number of readers, which increased the demand for books. This increased demand, coupled with a number of important technological advances, brought the price of books within reach of most people. In 1861, the United States had the highest literacy rate of any country in the world (58%); and 40 years later at the start of the 20th century, nine out of every 10 US citizens could read.

THE FLOWERING OF THE NOVEL

The 1800s saw a series of important refinements to the process of printing, most notably the **linotype** machine, a typewriter-like keyboard that allowed printers to set type mechanically rather than manually, and **offset lithography**, which permitted printing from photographic plates rather than from heavy, fragile metal casts. The combination of this technically improved, lower-cost printing (and therefore lower-cost publications) and widespread literacy produced the flowering of the novel in the 1800s. Major US book publishers Harper Brothers and John Wiley & Sons—both in business today—were established in New York in 1817 and 1807, respectively. And books such as Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851), and Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* (1884) were considered by many of their readers to be equal to or better than the works of famous European authors such as Jane Austen, the Brontës, and Charles Dickens.

The growing popularity of books was noticed by brothers Irwin and Erastus Beadle. In 1860, they began publishing novels that sold for 10 cents each. These **dime novels** were inexpensive, and because they concentrated on frontier and adventure stories, they attracted growing numbers of readers. Within 5 years of their start, Beadle & Company had produced over 4 million volumes of what were also sometimes called **pulp novels** (**Tebbel, 1987**). Advertising titles such as *Malaeska: Indian Wife of the White Hunter* with the slogan "Dollar Books for a Dime!" the Beadles democratized books and turned them into a mass medium.

THE COMING OF PAPERBACK BOOKS

Dime novels were "paperback books" because they were produced with paper covers. However, publisher Allen Lane invented what we now recognize as the paperback in the midst of the Great Depression in London when he founded Penguin Books in 1935. Four years later, publisher Robert de Graff introduced the idea to the United States. His Pocket Books were small, inexpensive (25 cents) reissues of books that had already become successful as hardcovers. They were sold just about everywhere—newsstands, bookstores, train stations, shipping terminals, and drug and department stores. Within 8 weeks of their introduction, de Graff had sold 325,000 books (**Menand, 2015**). Soon, new and existing publishers joined the paperback boom, their popularity boosted by World War II soldiers' demand for "light, easily portable books" (**Tompkins, 2020**) and Fawcett Publication's decision in 1950 to start releasing paperback originals.

Traditionalists had some concern about the "cheapening of the book," but that was more than offset by the huge popularity of paperbacks and the willingness of publishers to take chances. For example, in the 1950s and 1960s, African American writers such as Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison were originally published in paperback, as were controversial works such as J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye.* Eventually, paperback books became the norm, surpassing hardcover book sales for the first time in 1960. Today, the majority of all physical books sold in the United States are paperbacks, and bookstores generate half their revenue from these sales.

Books and Their Audiences

The book is the least "mass" of our mass media in audience reach and in the magnitude of the industry itself, and this fact shapes the nature of the relationship between medium and audience. Publishing houses, both large and small, produce narrowly or broadly aimed titles for readers, who buy and carry away individual units. This more direct relationship between publishers and readers renders books fundamentally different from other mass media. For example, because books are less dependent than other mass media on attracting the largest possible audience, books are more able and more likely to incubate new, challenging, or unpopular ideas.

As the medium least dependent on advertiser support, books can be aimed at extremely small groups of readers, challenging them and their imaginations in ways that many sponsors would find unacceptable in advertising-based mass media. Because books are produced and sold as individual units—as opposed to a single television program simultaneously distributed to millions of viewers or a single edition of a mass-circulation newspaper—more "voices" can enter and survive in the industry. This medium can sustain more voices in the cultural forum than can other traditional mass media. As former head of the New York Public Library Vartan Gregorian explained to journalist Bill **Moyers (2007)**, when among books, "suddenly you feel humble. The whole world of humanity is in front of you. . . . Here it is, the human endeavor, human aspiration, human agony, human ecstasy, human bravura, human failures— all before you."

The Cultural Value of Books

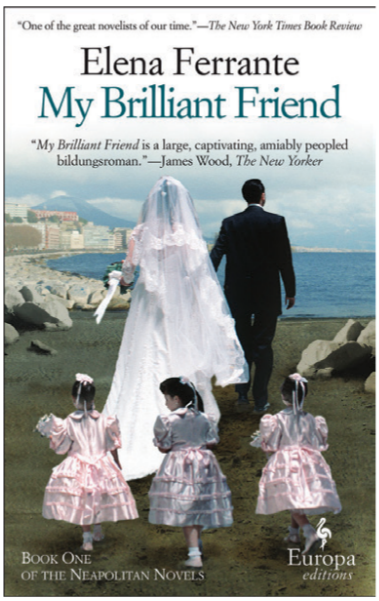
The book industry is bound by many of the same financial and industrial pressures that constrain other media, but books, more than the others, are in a position to transcend those constraints. In *Fahrenheit 451,* Montag's boss, Captain Beatty, explains to Montag why all books must be burned: "Once books appealed to a few people, here, there, everywhere. They could afford to be different. The world was roomy. But then the world got full of eyes and elbows and mouths" (**Bradbury, 1981**, p. 53).

Bradbury's firefighters of the future destroy books precisely because they *are* different. It is their difference from other mass media that makes books unique in our culture. Although all media serve the following cultural functions to some degree (for example, people surf the Internet's self-help sites for personal development, and popular music is sometimes an agent of social change), books traditionally have been seen as a powerful cultural force for these reasons:

- *Books are agents of social and cultural change.* Free of the need to generate mass circulation for advertisers, offbeat, controversial, even revolutionary ideas can reach the public. For example, Andrew Macdonald's *Turner Diaries* is the ideological and how-to guide of the antigovernment militia movement in the United States. Nonetheless, this radical, revolutionary book is openly published, purchased, and discussed. When massive protests spread across the country in the wake of the summer, 2020, police killing of George Floyd, books on racism became staple reading for many Americans, helping sow the seeds of change. By the second week of the demonstrations seven of the 10 top best-selling books on Amazon and nine out of the top 10 at Barnes & Noble were about racism (**Harris, 2020**). (For a look at other culturally and politically important books, see the essay "Books That Changed American Life.")

- *Books are an important cultural repository.* Want to definitively win an argument? Look it up. We often turn to books for certainty and truth about the world in which we live and the ones about which we want to know. Which countries border Chile? Find the atlas. James Brown's sax player? Look in Bob Gulla's *Icons of R&B and Soul.* Books have been edited and fact-checked, unlike much of what you might find online, and they often contain information and detail that you might not know to search for.
- *Books are our windows to the past.* What was the United States like in the 19th century? Read Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America.* England in the early 1800s? Read Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice.* Written during the times they reflect, these books are more accurate representations than those available in the modern movie and television depictions.
- *Books are important sources of personal development.* The obvious forms are self-help and personal improvement books. But books also speak to us more individually than advertiser-supported media because of their small, focused target markets. For example, *Our Bodies, Ourselves,* introduced by the Boston Women's Health Book Collective in the very earliest days of the modern feminist movement, is still published today. J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* was the literary anthem for the Baby Boomers in their teen years, as is William Gibson's *Neuromancer* for many Web pioneers. It is unlikely that any of these voices would have found their initial articulation in commercially sponsored media.

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▲ Elena Ferrante's *My Brilliant Friend*, as well as the other books in her "Neapolitan Novels," and Suzanne Collins's *Hunger Games* trilogy are hugely popular sources of entertainment, escape, and personal reflection.
(left) Europa Editions; (right) Rune hellestad/Corbis/Getty Images

USING MEDIA TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Books That Changed American Life

Books have been central to many of the most important social and political movements in our nation's history. *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, a book for and about women, is credited with beginning the women's health movement. The profits this book generates—some 40 years after its first appearance—continue to support what has become a worldwide undertaking. This influential book, with more than 4 million copies sold in 18 different languages, was conceived of in 1969 when a group of women meeting on the issue of women's health came to the conclusion that most women were relatively ignorant about their bodies (and by extension, their sexuality) and that the male-dominated medical profession was not particularly receptive to their needs. So they gave themselves a "summer project" to write a book about women's health (**Norsigian et al., 1999**). In 2012, the Library of Congress designated that summer project one of 88 "books that shaped America."

But this is only one of many books that have had a profound effect on how Americans have come to live their lives. *Dr. Spock's Baby and Child Care* by Dr. Benjamin Spock was published in 1946. Selling more than 50 million copies in 42 languages, its opening line is "Trust yourself. You know more than you think you do." This then-revolutionary idea "was the first public acknowledgment of parents' unique knowledge of, and feelings for, their own babies," says psychologist Penelope Leach (in **Stevens, 2012**). It encouraged mothers and fathers to trust their own instincts, empowering them to parent with confidence and start to challenge established authority figures who long advocated keeping kids on strict schedules and carefully limiting affection.

Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*, a fact-based work of fiction about America's meat industry, is "one of the most influential novels ever written. Published in 1906, it quickly became an international bestseller, inspiring sweeping and essential changes, including the passage of the Pure Food and Drug Act" (**Andrew, 2018**), that to this day continue to shape the safety regulations of our food as it is manufactured, shipped, and sold.

Silent Spring was released in 1962 as Rachel Carson's warning on the use of backyard pesticides such as DDT. "The number of books that have done as much good in the world can be counted on the arms of a starfish," writes *The New Yorker*'s Jill **Lepore (2018**, p. 64). We see its impact even today. *Silent Spring* launched the environmental movement; led to the passage of the Clean Air Act (1963), the Wilderness Act (1964), the National Environmental Policy Act (1969), the Clean Water Act, and the Endangered Species Act (both 1972); and led to the creation of the Environmental Protection Agency in 1970.

You might ask where is Elie Wiesel's *Night*, translated into English in 1960? It made the Holocaust feel real for millions of people who might have known it only from history books. Or *Fahrenheit 451*, significant enough to open this chapter? George Orwell's *1984*, again quite relevant in today's political climate? Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin,* which awakened a still-young America to the horrors of slavery in 1852? Alex Haley's *Roots,* which reminded Americans of one of their country's most significant sins? Counterculture bible of the peace and love movement of the 1960s, Kahlil Gibran's *The Prophet*? There are scores more; you no doubt can offer a contender or two. But as

a media-literate person, you might ask yourself if you could compile a similar list of TV shows or movies that have made the kind of difference wrought by these books.

- *Books are wonderful sources of entertainment, escape, and personal enjoyment.* Suzanne Collins, John Grisham, Stephenie Meyer, and Stephen King all specialize in writing highly entertaining and imaginative novels. The enjoyment found in the works of writers Veronica Roth (the *Divergent* series), John Irving (*The World According to Garp*, *Hotel New Hampshire*), Paula Hawkins (*Girl on a Train*) is undeniable. "Books are "strange, magically potent talismans of safety, sanity, and order," explains writer Ptolemy **Tompkins (2020**, p. 18), and there is indeed research evidence that reading fiction, specifically novels, has powerful restorative powers, for example, in overcoming depression or loss. This use of reading for therapeutic effect is called **bibliotherapy** (**Lindberg, 2020**). Books' therapeutic potential may never have been more visible than during the 2020 coronavirus quarantine. Sales of print books were up over 6% from the same period the year before; demand was so high that printing companies were unable to turn out enough books to meet industry demand. "A book is the most uniquely, beautifully designed product to have with you in lockdown," explained Penguin Random House CEO Madeline McIntosh (in **Alter, 2020a**, p. B1).
- *The purchase and reading of a book is a much more individual, personal activity than consuming advertiser-supported (television, radio, newspapers, and magazines) or heavily promoted (popular music and movies) media.* As such, books tend to encourage personal reflection to a greater degree than these other media. We are part of the tribe, as media theorist Marshall McLuhan would say, when we consume other media. But we are alone when we read a book. "Books allow you to fully explore a topic and immerse yourself in a deeper way than most media today," explained Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg on the launch of his book club, A Year of Books (in **Widdicombe, 2015**, p. 18).

- *Books are mirrors of culture.* Books, along with other mass media, reflect the culture that produces and consumes them.
- *Book readers are less likely to lose their jobs to robots.* Reading literature boosts human capital skills, says economist Morton Schapiro, and those "skills really pay off in the labor force. If you're worried about artificial intelligence, automation, robotics, outsourcing to cheaper providers in Hyderabad or other places, you'd better be able to understand people" (in **Parramore, 2018**). Book readers are soldiers in the resistance to the tech giant's takeover of humanity. "If the tech companies hope to absorb the totality of human existence," explains journalist Franklin Foer, "then reading on paper is one of the few slivers of life that they can't fully integrate" (in **Kolbert, 2017**, p. 45).

Libraries, Books, and Social Infrastructure

There is no better indicator of books' cultural value than people's widespread support for free and open access to public libraries. For example, when, in 2018, the Trump administration proposed to reduce funding for the Institute of Museum and Library Services, the federal agency charged with sustaining the nation's libraries, especially those in poorer rural and urban areas, the reaction was so swift and unfriendly that Congress actually voted to increase the Institute's budget (**vanden Heuvel, 2018**).

Supporters of libraries assert that libraries provide **social infrastructure**, physical spaces that shape the way people interact. Sociologist Eric **Klineberg (2018)** explained why libraries still matter:

> Libraries are the kinds of places where people with different backgrounds, passions, and interests can take part in a living democratic culture. They are the kinds of places where the public, private, and philanthropic sectors can work together to reach for something higher than the bottom line. It's worth noting that "liber," the Latin root of the word "library," means both "book" and "free." Libraries stand for and exemplify something that needs defending: the public institutions that—even in an age of atomization, polarization, and inequality—serve as the bedrock of civil society. (p. SR6)



▾ 100,000 little libraries-on-a-stick dot the streets of 100 different countries.

Jordan Dowd

This reality is not lost on most Americans. Fifty-five percent of voters see the library as an essential local institution, and 53% see it as a source of community pride. Fifty-eight percent say public libraries advance education, and 51% believe libraries enhance the quality of life of their communities (**OCLC, 2018**). In fact, visiting the library is Americans' the most common communal cultural activity. Their annual average of 10.5 trips exceeds even the number of times they go to the movies and sporting events (**McCarthy, 2020**). Libraries' social infrastructure role was on vivid display during 2020's coronavirus pandemic, as they joined the ranks of "second responders," feeding the hungry, 3-D printing personal protection gear, providing 24-hour Wi-Fi hotspots, sheltering the homeless, offering emergency childcare, setting up curb-side book pick-up, and expanding availability to digital materials like e-books and online magazines (**Fallows, 2020**).

This libraries-build-community ethic spawned the Little Free Library movement in which individuals build small boxes and place them on posts on their lawns so that others can take and/or leave a book (originated in 2009, there are now 100,000 of these "libraries on a stick" in 100 different countries), and in some towns, even police cruisers have become bookmobiles, with which officers deliver a variety of titles to borrowers as they make their rounds (**"The History," 2021**).

Censorship

Because of their influence as cultural repositories and agents of social change, books have often been targeted for **censorship**. A book is censored when someone in authority limits publication of or access to it. Censorship can and does occur in many situations and in all media (more on this in **Chapter 14**). But because of the respect our culture traditionally holds for books, book banning takes on a particularly poisonous connotation in the United States.

Reacting to censorship presents a dilemma for book publishers. Publishers have an obligation to their owners and stockholders to make a profit. Yet, if responsible people in positions of authority deem a certain book unsuitable for readers, shouldn't publishers do the right thing for the larger society and comply with demands to cease its publication?

This was the argument presented by morals crusader Anthony Comstock in 1873 when he established the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice. It was the argument used in Berlin on the evening of May 10, 1933, when Nazi propaganda chief Joseph Goebbels put a torch to a bonfire that consumed 20,000 books. It was the argument made in 1953 when US senator Joseph McCarthy demanded the removal of more than 100 books from US diplomatic libraries because of their "procommunist" slant. (Among them was Thomas Paine's *Common Sense*.) It is the argument made today by people like the members of the Matanuska-Sustina Borough school board in Alaska who pulled *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* from the high school curriculum because it contained "sexually explicit material" and "anti-white messaging" (**Taylor, 2020**) and the parent group in Virginia's Loudoun County who unsuccessfully lobbied to banish *Hurricane Child* and *The Pants Project* from elementary school libraries because they featured LGBTQ characters (**Nathanson, 2020**).

According to the American Library Association Office of Intellectual Freedom and the American Civil Liberties Union, among the library and school books most frequently targeted by modern censors are the *Harry Potter* series, Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huck-leberry Finn*, Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*, the *Goosebumps* series, Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, and children's favorite *In the Night Kitchen* by Maurice Sendak. You can see the 10 most frequently banned library books of 2020 in **Figure 3.1**. With how many are you familiar? Which ones have you read?

Book publishers can confront censorship by recognizing that their obligations to their industry and to themselves demand that they resist censorship. The publishing industry and the publisher's role in it are fundamental to the operation and maintenance of our democratic society. Rather than accepting the censor's argument that certain voices require silencing for the good of the culture, publishers in a democracy have an obligation to make the stronger argument that free speech be protected and encouraged. The short list of frequently censored titles in the previous paragraph should immediately make it evident why the power of ideas is worth fighting for. You can test your own willingness to censor in the box titled "Would You Ban Books by Nazis?"

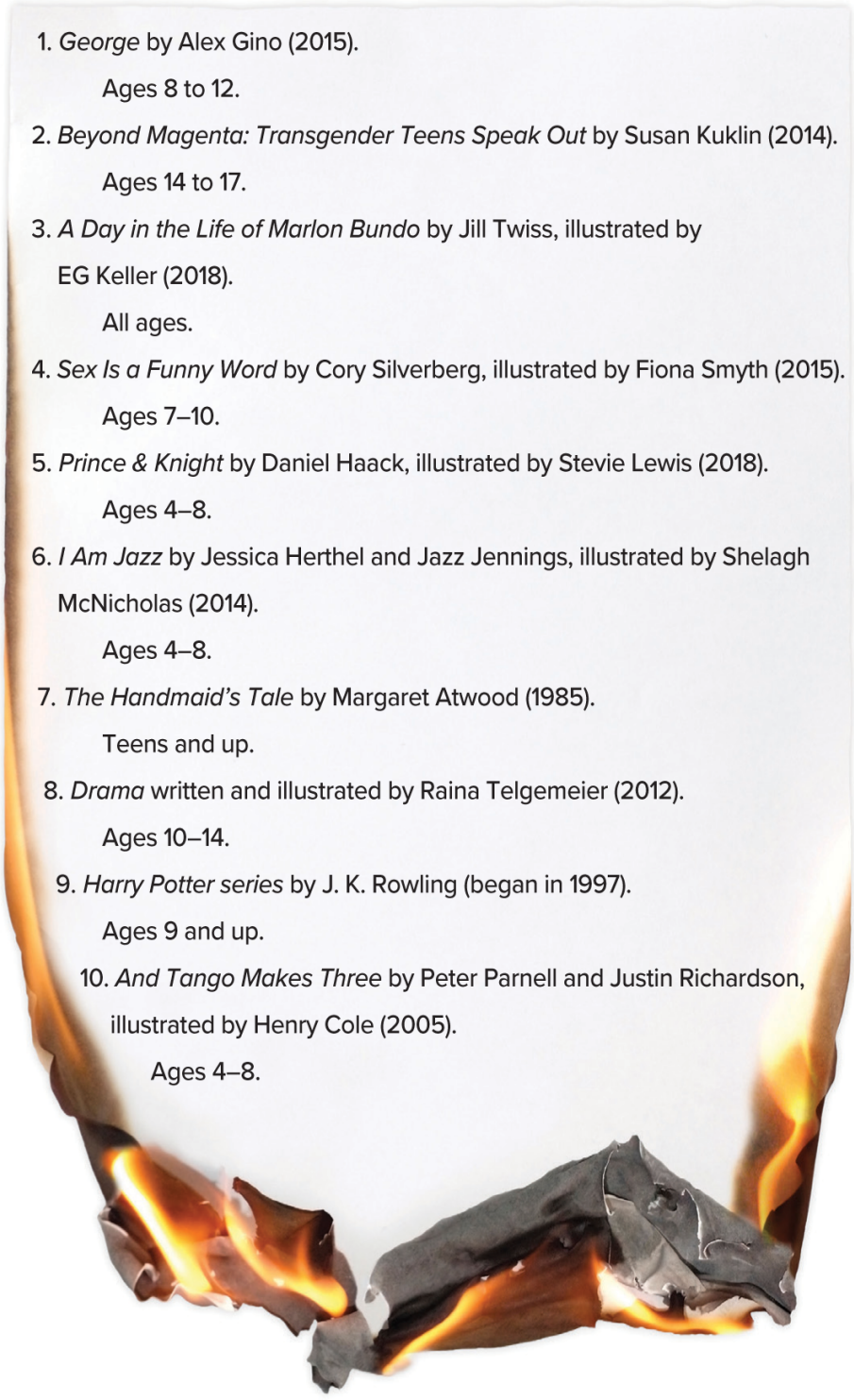


Figure 3.1 The 10 Most-Banned Books of 2020.

Source: Charles, 2020.

Oleksiy Maksymenko/Alamy Stock Photo





▲ *The Handmaid's Tale* and *To Kill a Mockingbird* are two popular books that constantly raise censors' ire.

(left) Kathy deWitt/Alamy Stock Photo; (right) Thomas Cordy/Palm Beach Post/ZUMA Press/Alamy Stock Photo

CULTURAL FORUM

Would You Ban Books by Nazis?

As 2016 began, a long-banned work showed up in German bookstores. Adolf Hitler's ultranationalist, racist, and anti-Semitic *Mein Kampf* reappeared after 70 years of censorship.

Many Germans were appalled, arguing that the 1925 hate-filled tract, instrumental in the Nazi's rise to power, would further inflame the racist and xenophobic fervor that at the time of this new release seemed to be taking hold across Europe. Others were satisfied with the new version of the hateful book because, rather than a reissue of Hitler's original version, it was a heavily annotated edition, the culmination of 6 years of work by scholars from the Institute of Contemporary History in Munich. Their extensively researched rebuttal of the original's 600 pages of lies and half-truths swelled the reissue to 2,000 pages. "It would be simply irresponsible to let this racist work of inhumanity wander loose in the public domain without comment," wrote the Institute's director, Andreas Wirsching (in **"Germany," 2016**, p. 14).

Now consider this situation, one a bit closer to home. Amazon, the world's largest and most dominant bookseller (**Shephard, 2020b**), is "quietly canceling its Nazis." The online giant pulled from its list titles by David Duke, former leader of the Ku Klux Klan, and by George Lincoln Rockwell, founder of the American Nazi Party. Also banned are scores of anti-Semitic works like *Conspiracy of the Six-Pointed Star*, *The Ruling Elite: The Zionist Seizure of World Power*, and *A History of Central Banking and the Enslavement of Mankind*.

When Amazon drops a book it's as if it never existed, because not only does the company itself refuse to sell the book, but it refuses to honor sales from other sellers who provide much of its inventory. "Amazon reserves the right to determine whether

content provides an acceptable experience," the company explained to one bookseller. . ."This product was identified as one that is prohibited for sale." A seller's failure to delete listings for a banned book could lead to the deactivation of its selling account and possible confiscation of any owed money.

The question that entered the cultural forum, therefore, is how far should a powerful—*the world's* most powerful—bookseller go in censoring disfavored expression? Deborah Caldwell-Stone, director of the American Library Association's Office for Intellectual Freedom, argued that Amazon has the same First Amendment right as any retailer, the "right to pick and choose the materials they offer. Despite its size, it does not have to sponsor speech it finds unacceptable."

"But," counter critics like Danny Caine, a bookstore owner and no fan of Nazi writing, "I still don't trust Amazon to be the arbiters of free speech. What if Amazon decided to pull books representing a less despicable political viewpoint? Or books critical of Amazon's practices?" (all quotes from **Streitfeld, 2020**, p. A15).

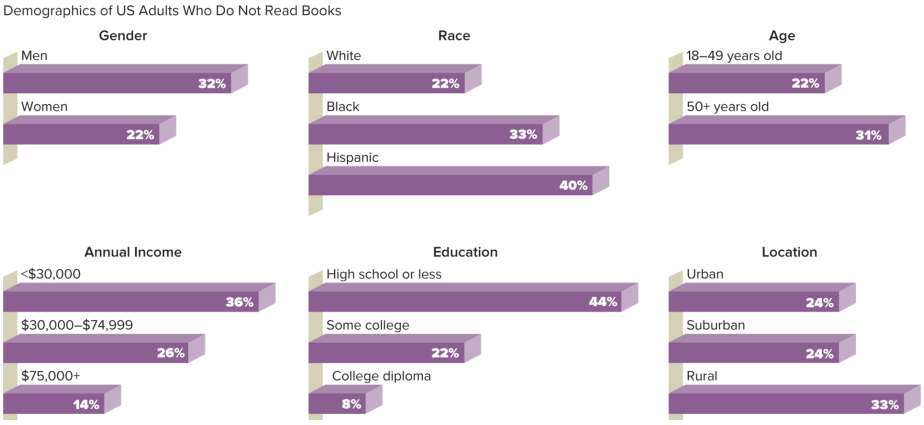
Enter Your Voice

- Did the Germans, in providing context and critique, offer a better solution to dealing with poisonous books than did Google, which simply banned them?
- Do you support the retailer's First Amendment right to deny expression to others, however odious? If so, what does this say about your commitment to free expression?
- There's an old expression in publishing, "There's no such thing as a little censorship." Do you agree? Why or why not?

Aliteracy as Self-Censorship

Censors ban and burn books because books are repositories of ideas, ideas that can be read and considered with limited outside influence or official supervision. But what kind of culture develops when, by our own refusal to read books, we figuratively save the censors the trouble of striking the match? First, there is the problem of **illiteracy**, the inability to read or write. A federal appeals court ruled in 2020 that literacy was a constitutional right, writing, "Effectively every interaction between a citizen and her government depends on literacy. Voting, taxes, the legal system, jury duty—all of these are predicated on the ability to read and comprehend written thoughts" (in **Albanese, 2020**). Nonetheless, today, 30 million adults in the United States cannot read or write, above a third-grade level (**Editorial Team, 2020**).

Then there is the issue of **aliteracy**, wherein people possess the ability to read but are unwilling to do so, which amounts to doing the censors' work for them. As Russian immigrant and writer Joseph **Brodsky (1987)** explained when accepting his Nobel Prize for Literature, "Since there are no laws that can protect us from ourselves, no criminal code is capable of preventing a true crime against literature; though we can condemn the material suppression of literature—the persecution of writers, acts of censorship, the burning of books—we are powerless when it comes to its worst violation: that of not reading the books. For that crime, a person pays with his whole life; if the offender is a nation, it pays with its history."



▲ **Figure 3.2** Percentage of American Adults Who Have Not Read a Book in the Last 12 Months.

Source: ***Perrin, 2019***.

Only slightly more than half, 55%, of US adults has read a book in the past 12 months (**Nawotka, 2020**); the share of Americans who have not done so is higher today than it was a decade ago (**Perrin, 2019**). You can see the percentages of Americans who do not read by demographic in **Figure 3.2**. Do these data represent your reading habits? Do you agree with the argument that the lack of reading has consequences for our country, as well as for individuals?

And despite evidence that small children who are read to can recognize the letters of the alphabet, count to 20, write their own names, and read sooner than those who are not (**National Education Association, 2019**), a quarter of American kids from ages 0 to 8 are read to never or less often than once a week (**Zickuhr & Rainie, 2014**).

Declining reading rates are important far beyond issues of academic performance. Regardless of income, reading correlates closely with quality of social life, voting, political activism, participation in culture and fine arts, volunteerism, charity work, and exercise. National Endowment for the Arts chair Dana Gioia explained more than a decade ago after her organization's study of Americans' reading habits: "The habit of regular reading awakens something inside a person that makes him or her take their own life more seriously and at the same time develops the sense that other people's lives are real" (in **Thompson, 2007**, p. C1). Another well-qualified group of experts—your parents—endorses Gioia's argument. When asked to identify the skills "most important for children to get ahead in the world today," 86% identified reading, a score second only to that of communication's 90% (**Clark, 2017**).

Scope and Structure of the Book Industry

More than a million traditional and nontraditional (print-on-demand, self-published, and niche) titles are published in the United States each year. The American publishing industry annually sells over 1.8 billion print books (**"Who We," 2021**), producing about $15 billion in sales (**Milliot, 2020b**), and generating $26 billion in overall annual revenue (**Milliot, 2020a**).

And despite, or possibly because of the coronavirus lockdown, sales of print books increased 8.2% in 2020 over 2019 (**Milliot, 2021b**). Today, more books than ever are being published. More books are being read, and more people are writing books. Books that would never have been released through traditional publishers are now routinely published.

Trends and Convergence in Book Publishing

Like all the media with which we are familiar, convergence is changing the nature of the book industry. In addition to convergence, contemporary publishing and its relationship with its readers are being reshaped by conglomeration, hypercommercialism and demand for profits, the growth of small presses, restructuring of retailing, and changes in readership.

Convergence

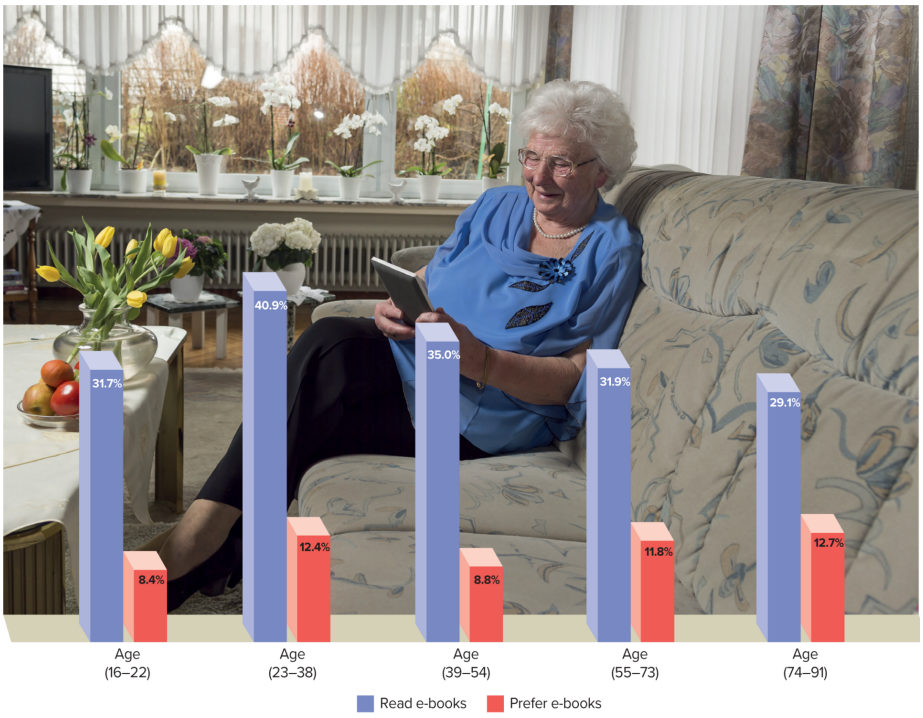
Convergence is altering almost all aspects of the book industry. Most obviously, the Internet is changing the way books are distributed and sold. But this digital technology, in the form of **e-publishing**, the publication of books initially or exclusively in a digital format, also offers a new way for writers' ideas to be published. In fact, many of today's "books" are no longer composed of paper pages snug between two covers. As former Random House editor Peter **Osnos (2009)** explained early in his industry's digital revolution, because books do not rely on advertising or subscribers, "[t]he main challenge is to manage inventory, making books available where, when, and how readers want them. And on that score, the advances in gadgetry and the changes in popular [reading] habits over the past decade. . .have produced a major advance" (p. 48). By gadgetry, Osnos means primarily e-books, print on demand (POD), and a host of electronic reading devices.

E-BOOKS

In her mid-40s, Erika Mitchell, writing under the pen name E. L. James, was having some success publishing fan fiction based on the vampire novels *Twilight* as **e-books–** books downloaded in electronic form from the Internet to computers, e-readers, or mobile digital devices. This success brought her to the attention of traditional publisher Random House, and, working together, they turned her *50 Shades of Grey* trilogy into a series of best sellers and major motion pictures. In fact, those three titles are the last decade's top-3 selling books (**Kelly, 2020**). Romance writer Meredith Wild, who writes mainly after her children leave for school, has sold millions of self-published erotic novels on Amazon and other sites, and the success of her *Red Ledger* and *Book of Zeus* series brought her not only entry onto the *New York Times* and *USA Today* best-seller lists, but a multi-million dollar advance from traditional publisher Forever.

Established authors fare well, too: Stieg Larsson's best seller, *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, and the other books in his trilogy, *The Girl Who Played with Fire* and *The Girl Who Kicked the Hornet's Nest*, have sold more digital than hard-copy editions, and big-name authors such as Stephen King now routinely write works primarily for e-publication.

Popular acceptance of e-books seemed in place by Christmas Day 2009, when Amazon reported that for the first time in its history, it sold more e-books than traditional paper books in a single day. Today, Americans read about 1.8 billion e-books a year, a number that has dropped in recent years (**Milliot, 2020c**). Industry experts explain the decrease in the growth of e-books to readers' digital fatigue, an explanation bolstered by data indicating that Americans' number-one favorite activity when unplugged from their digital devices is reading books in their paper version (**Birth, 2016**). You can see American readers' comfort with e-readers, by age in **Figure 3.3**.



▲ **Figure 3.3** Percentage of Americans Who Use and Prefer e-Readers, by Age.

Tanja Esser/Shutterstock

Source: Rae, 2020.

Still, e-publishing's greatest impact may be on new writers. In fact, the number of self-published titles has grown 156% since 2012 and in 2017 that number exceeded one million for the first time (**"New Record," 2018**). Why the growth? Because anyone with a computer and a story to tell can bypass the traditional book publishers, first-time authors or writers of small, niche books now have an outlet for their work. An additional advantage of e-publishing, especially for new or small-market authors, is that e-books can be published almost instantly. James Patterson has made enough money selling his books that he can wait the 1 to 2 years it typically takes for a traditional novel to be produced once it is in the publisher's hands. Rarely can new authors afford this luxury.

Another advantage is financial. Authors who distribute through e-publishers typically get royalties of 40% to 70%, compared to the 5% to 10% offered by traditional publishers. This lets aspiring writers offer their books for as little as 99 cents or $2.99, making those works more attractive to readers willing to take a low-cost chance to find something and someone new and interesting—earning writers even more sales. Authors who write for Amazon's e-reader Kindle, for example, earned more than $300 million in 2019 alone. More than a thousand of these Kindle Direct Publishing authors took in over $100,000 (**Milliot, 2020c**).

Still, traditional book publishers say their lower royalty rates are mandated by the expense of the services they provide, such as editorial assistance and marketing, not to mention the cost of production and distribution. The debate over self- versus traditional publishing is really a disagreement over the value of **disintermediation**, eliminating gatekeepers between artists and audiences. Eliminate the intermediaries and more original content of greater variety from fresher voices gets to more people. Keep the intermediaries and quality is ensured, and while an occasional interesting work or

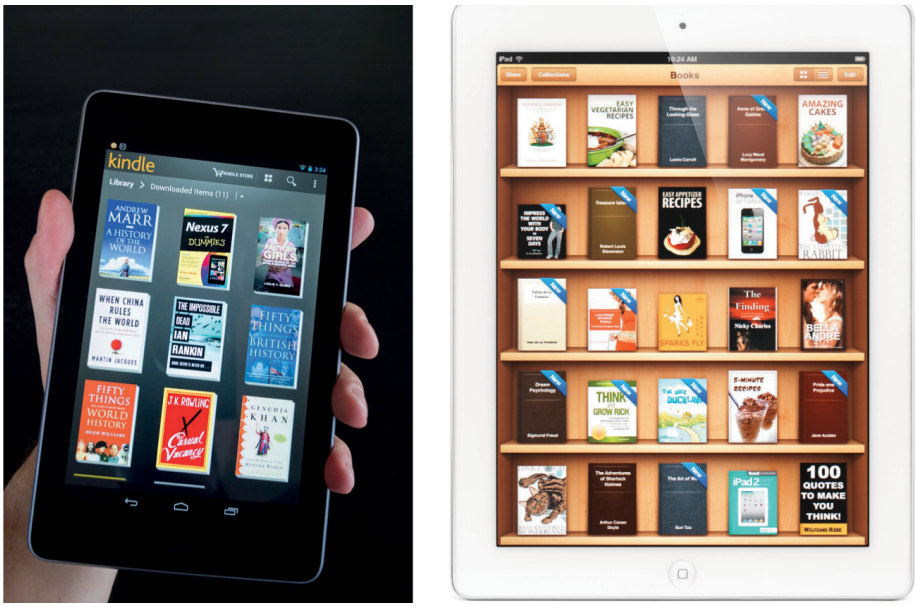
new voice might be missed, the industry's overall product remains superior. For books, disintermediation in the form of self-publication runs the gamut from completely self-published-and-promoted works to self-publishing with an assist, with digital publishers providing a full range of services—copy-editing, securing and commissioning of artwork, cover design, promotion, and in some cases, distribution of traditional paper books to brick-and-mortar bookstores.

Print on demand (POD) is another form of e-publishing. Companies such as Xlibris, AuthorHouse, and iUniverse are POD publishers. They store works digitally and, once ordered, a book can be instantly printed, bound, and sent. Alternatively, once ordered, that book can be printed and bound at a bookstore that has the proper technology. The advantage for publisher and reader is financial. POD books require no warehouse for storage, there are no **remainders** (unsold books returned to publishers to be sold at great discount) to eat into profits, and the production costs, in both personnel and equipment, are tiny when compared to traditional publishing. These factors not only produce less expensive books for readers but also greatly expand the variety of books that can and will be published. And although a large publisher like Oxford University Press can produce thousands of volumes a year, smaller POD operations can make a profit on as few as 100 orders. Additionally, POD operations easily double as self-publishing houses, as do those listed just above. Large commercial publishers have also found a place for POD in their business, using the technology to rush hot, headline-inspired books to readers. In 2008, for the first time, American publishers released more POD titles than new and revised titles produced by traditional methods; in 2010 the ratio was more than three to one.

SMARTPHONES, TABLETS, E-READERS, AND AUDIOBOOKS

Many booksellers and even publishing companies themselves offer e-books specifically for smartphones, tablets, and **e-readers**, digital devices with the appearance of traditional books that display content that is digitally stored and accessed. Although earlier attempts at producing e-readers had failed, the 2006 unveiling of the Sony Reader, dubbed the iBook, proved so successful that it was soon followed by several similar devices, such as Amazon's various Kindle models, Apple's iPad, and Barnes & Noble's Nook. (In 2014 Sony discontinued its e-reader technologies.) In addition, smartphone and tablet e-reader apps such as Libby, Bookari, and Scribd have also appeared. Today, the number of dedicated e-readers in use is in sharp decline; just under one in five American adults owns one (**Haines, 2020**), but because nearly 85% have smart-phones and 53% have tablets, the large majority holds in its hands the ability to read digital books (**Edison Research, 2020**).

Nonetheless, readers have welcomed the devices and publishers have understandably responded, given the industry's belief that "any business that requires a truck these days, forget it" (**Thompson, 2009**). Hundreds of thousands of in- and out-of-print titles are available for **platform agnostic publishing—** digital and traditional paper books available for any and all reading devices. And those reading devices themselves will continue to evolve, with advances such as flexible screens so thin they can be rolled up and fully text-functional e-readers that let users copy and paste text to Word documents on their computers.



▲ Amazon's Kindle, Apple's iPad, and numerous other e-readers have transformed publishing and reading.

(left) Masterton/agefotostock/ Newscom; (right) Oleksiy Maksymenko Photography/Alamy Stock Photo

Book lovers have also flocked to **audio-books**, the presentation, in sound, of a book's text, traditionally on tape or CD or, now most commonly, streamed or as a digital download. Nearly half of all Americans report having listened to audiobooks, and the medium has experienced nine straight years of double-digit revenue growth, reaching $1.3 billion in 2020 (**Milliot, 2021a**). The company Audible, with more than 440,000 titles, is the biggest "publisher" of audiobooks. Owned by Amazon, it offers monthly subscriptions rather than individual sales. Its ACX (Audiobook Creation Exchange) platform helps authors independently produce their own audiobooks. Other publishers (Scribd, for example) offer apps allowing "readers" to easily download new audio titles to their smartphones. One sign of audiobooks' vitality is that A-list authors, such as Michael Lewis (*Moneyball*, *The Blind Side*) and Jack Gantos (the *Joey Pigza* series), write new works specifically for audiobook release. Audiobooks are the fastest-growing sector of the publishing industry. As a result, all of the major publishers now have their own audio divisions.

The past decade has seen increasing efforts to digitize many of the world's books. Online bookseller Amazon has scanned every page of every in-print book it offers into its Search Inside the Book feature, and it has acquired its own POD service, CreateSpace, that instantly provides any book requested. Several nonprofit organizations are also making searchable and downloadable books available online. Project Gutenberg offers 62,000 noncopyrighted classics; the Internet Archive's Open Library has more than 4 million e-books for borrow; the Million Book Project also has 1 million government texts and older titles; and the International Children's Digital Library and the Rosetta Project make downloadable tens of thousands of current and antique children's books from around the world.

Conglomeration

More than any other medium, the book industry into the 1970s and 1980s was dominated by relatively small operations. Publishing houses were traditionally staffed by fewer than 20 people, the large majority by fewer than 10. Today, however, although tens of thousands of businesses call themselves book publishers, only a very small percentage produces four or more titles a year. The industry is dominated now by the so-called Big 5 publishing houses—Penguin Random House (300 **imprints**, or individual book publishing companies), Hachette (23 imprints), HarperCollins (240 imprints), Macmillan (30 imprints), and Simon & Schuster (52 imprints)—and a few other large concerns, like Time Warner Publishing. Each of these giants was once, sometimes with another name, an independent book publisher. All are now part of large national or international corporate conglomerates. Penguin Random House and Simon & Schuster, both owned by German conglomerate Bertelsmann, together control more than a third of all US book sales (**Mullin & Trachtenberg, 2020**). These major publishers control more than 80% of all American book sales. Even e-publishing is dominated by the big companies, as all the major houses and booksellers maintain e-publishing units.

Opinion on the benefit of corporate ownership is divided. The positive view is that the rich parent company can infuse the imprint with necessary capital, enabling it to attract better authors or to take gambles on new writers that would, in the past, have been impossible. Another plus is that the corporate parent's other media holdings can be used to promote and repackage the books for greater profitability. Neither of these benefits is insignificant, argue many industry insiders, because book publishing is more like gambling than business. Literary agent Eric Simonoff says the industry is "unpredictable . . . the profit margins are so small, the cycles (from contract to publication) are so incredibly long" and there is an "almost total lack of market research" (quoted in **Boss, 2007**, p. B6). Fiction writer James Patterson, for example, suffered 12 rejections for *The Thomas Berryman Number* before Little, Brown accepted his first novel in 1976. Patterson has since rewarded his publisher with 114 *New York Times* best sellers (James Patterson, 2020). Even J. K. Rowling's first *Harry Potter* book was rejected 12 times before finding a publisher (**Millington, 2018**).

The negative view is that as publishing houses become just one in the parent company's long list of enterprises, product quality suffers as important editing and production steps are eliminated to maximize profits. Before conglomeration, publishing was often described as a **cottage industry**; that is, publishing houses were small operations, closely identified with their personnel—both their own small staffs and their authors. The cottage imagery, however, extends beyond smallness of size. There was a quaintness and charm associated with publishing houses—their attention to detail, their devotion to tradition, the care they gave to their façades (their reputations). "The act of publishing is essentially the act of making public one's own enthusiasm," reminisced Robert Gottlieb, longtime editor in chief at old-line houses Simon & Schuster and Knopf (in **Menand, 2016**, p. 80). The world of corporate conglomerates has little room for such niceties, as profit dominates all other considerations. More than 40 years ago, acclaimed novelist and editor E. L. Doctorow spoke about conglomeration in the book industry, testifying before Congress that the

> delicate balance of pressures within a publishing firm is upset by the conglomerate values. The need for greater and greater profits and the expectation of them overloads the scale in favor of commerce—depending on the particular house and its editorial resources, faster or more slowly: the crossword-puzzle books and cookbooks and sexual-position books and how-to books and movie-tie-in books and television-celebrity books gradually occupy more of the publishers' time and investment. (in **The Editors, 2020**)

Today he would see profits-over-quality at play in recent publishing practices such as the use of "big data" from online e-book readership not only to determine which books get published (**Alter & Russell, 2016**), but also to help shape characters and story lines in books as they are being

written (**Miller, 2014**), as well as when fans read online manuscripts and then vote on which should be published (**Alter, 2014**).

Demand for Profits and Hypercommercialism

The threat from conglomeration resides in the parent company's overemphasis on the bottom line—that is, profitability at all costs. Unlike in the days when G. P. Putnam's sons and the Schuster family actually ran the houses that carried their names, critics fear that now little pride is taken in the content of books and that risk taking (tackling controversial issues, experimenting with new styles, finding and nurturing unknown authors) is becoming rarer and rarer. In industry parlance, the prevailing philosophy is "best sellers sell the best" (**Alter, 2020a**). "Given the choice between seeking out the new, the strange, and the shocking or hanging onto personalities and news hooks and follower counts, the Big Five opt for the latter," lament the Editors of culture journal *N + 1* (2020).

As a result, writes Jason Epstein, founder of Anchor Books, his is an "increasingly distressed industry" mired in "severe structural problems." Among them are a retail bookselling system that favors "brand name" authors and "a bestseller-driven system of high royalty advances." He says that contemporary publishing is "overconcentrated," "undifferentiated," and "fatally rigid" (quoted in **Feldman, 2001**, p. 35). To Doctorow, Epstein, and other critics of conglomeration, the industry seems overwhelmed by a blockbuster mentality—lust for the biggest-selling authors and titles possible, sometimes with little consideration for literary merit. For example, Simon & Schuster recently formed a division, Keywords Press, to publish books written by Internet celebrities, signing YouTube stars Shane Dawson and Justine Ezarik, better known as iJustine. Tom Clancy received $45 million for two books from Penguin Putnam. James Patterson signed with Hachette for $150 million to write 11 adult and 6 young adult books in a three-year span. Michelle (for *Becoming*) and Barack Obama (for an eventual memoir) collected $65 million from Random House. Amy Schumer got $9 million for *The Girl with the Lower Back Tattoo* and Bruce Springsteen $10 million for his memoir, both from Simon & Schuster (**Tanjeem, 2020**).

As the resources and energies of publishing houses are committed to a small number of superstar writers and blockbuster books, smaller, more interesting, possibly more serious or important books do not get published. As one frustrated literacy agent explained, "This rarefied group now gets an outsize amount of the limited spoils: bigger advances, more of retailers' limited space, and more of publishers' time and attention," producing a "frustratingly circular" system (in **Deahl, 2019**).

If these types of books cannot get published, they may never be written. Will we be denied their ideas in the cultural forum? We will see, but as we read earlier in this chapter, it is converged technologies like POD and e-books that may well be the vehicles that ensure those ideas have access to the forum and us to them.

Publishers attempt to offset the large investments they do make through the sale of **subsidiary rights**, that is, the sale of the book, its contents, and even its characters to filmmakers, paperback publishers, book clubs, foreign publishers, and product producers like T-shirt, poster, coffee cup, and greeting card manufacturers. For example, based on the success of his first book, *Cold Mountain*, Charles Frazier's one-page proposal for his second novel earned his publisher $3 million for the film rights alone from Paramount Pictures. The industry itself estimates that many publishers would go out of business if it were not for the sale of these rights. Writers such as John Grisham (*The Client*) and Gay Talese (*Thy*

Neigh-bor's Wife) can command several million dollars for the film rights to their books. In fact, demand for "prestige" content on the part of video streaming services, such as Hulu and Netflix, and other channels hoping to compete with them is fueling an "adaptation explosion." Where previously 95% of subsidy rights sales went to the film industry, television— broadcast, cable, and streaming—now buys the rights to more than 60% of books that make it to a screen (**Bentley, 2018**).

As greater and greater sums are tied up in blockbusters, and as subsidiary rights therefore grow in importance, the marketing, promotion, and public relations surrounding a book become crucial. This leads to the additional fear that only the most promotable books will be published—bookstores are flooded with celebrity cookbooks, celebrity picture books, unauthorized biographies of celebrities, and tell-all autobiographies from the children of celebrities.

In addition, **tie-in novels**—books based on popular television shows and movies—have become more common. *Bratva* is a novel using characters from the FX Network's hit series *Sons of Anarchy. Homeland*, *Fringe*, and *CSI* are other TV shows that have enjoyed novelization, as are *Murder She Wrote*, *Supernatural*, and *Beverly Hills 90210*.

Several other recent events suggest that the demand for profits is bringing even more hypercommercialism to the book business. One trend is the "Hollywoodization" of books. Potential synergies between books, television, and movies have spurred big media companies such as Viacom, Time Warner, and News Corp. to invest heavily in publishing, buying up houses big and small. Some movie studios are striking "exclusive" deals with publishers—for example, Walden Media teams with Penguin Young Readers, Focus Films with Random House, and Paramount with Simon & Schuster. In addition, ReganBooks (owned by HarperCollins, which, in turn, is owned by News Corp.) moved its offices from New York to Los Angeles to be in a better position to develop material that has both book and film potential. Several other major movie studios have set up operations in New York City to be closer to the source of books, magazine articles, and plays that they hope to turn into material for the big screen. Critics fear that only those books with the most synergistic potential will be signed and published. Advocates argue just the opposite—a work that might have had limited profit potential as a "mere" book, and therefore gone unpublished, just might find a home across several mutually promoting platforms. They point to *Sideways*, a small-selling book that became a best-selling book after the movie it inspired became a hit.

Another trend that has created much angst among book traditionalists is the paid product placement. Movies and television have long accepted payments from product manufacturers to feature their brands in their content, but it was not until May 2000 that the first paid-for placement appeared in a fiction novel. Bill Fitzhugh's *Cross Dressing*, published by Avon, contains what are purchased commercials for Seagram liquor. As with other media that accept product placements, critics fear that content will be bent to satisfy sponsors rather than serve the quality of the work itself. Product placement in e-books has done little to allay those concerns. Embedded links in e-books can boost the potential value of a placement, making them attractive to sponsors. This has produced what the industry calls **shopfiction**, the embedding of links into traditional and e-books taking readers directly to paid sponsors' websites. Whenever a character's clothing or some other product is described, readers can click on a link in an e-book, or in a printed book scan a **QR code** (the small barcode with squares that direct mobile device users to a specific website), and be directed to a website where it can be purchased (**Grady, 2019**).

Growth of Small Presses



▲ Actor, comic, and first-time author Amy Schumer landed a $9 million advance for her book *The Girl with the Lower Back Tattoo.*

Xavier Collin/Image Press Agency/ Alamy Stock Photo

The overcommercialization of the book industry is mitigated somewhat by the rise in the number of smaller publishing houses. Today there are more than 80,000 book publishers in the United States, the vast majority being small presses. Although these smaller operations are large in number, they account for a very small proportion of books sold. They cannot compete in the blockbuster world. By definition *alternative*, they specialize in specific areas such as the environment, feminism, gay issues, and how-to. They can also publish writing otherwise uninteresting to bigger houses, such as poetry and literary commentary. Relying on specialization and narrowly targeted marketing, books such as women's study scholar Becca Anderson's *The Book of Awesome Women Writers*, published by Mango Publishing; Claudette McShane's *Warning! Dating May Be Hazardous to Your Health*, published by Mother Courage Press; and *Split Verse,* a book of poems about divorce published by Midmarch Arts, can not only earn healthy sales but also make a difference in their readers' lives.

And what may seem surprising is that it is the Internet, specifically Amazon, that is boosting the fortunes of these smaller houses. Because it compiles data on customer preferences (books bought, browsed, recommended to others, or wished for), it can make recommendations to potential buyers, and quite often those recommendations are from small publishers that the buyer might never have considered (or never have seen at a brick-and-mortar retailer). In other words, Amazon may help level the book industry playing field just a bit.



▲ Bookseller Amazon's signing of bestselling authors like Dean Koontz marks its entry into every aspect of the publishing industry, alarming its many critics.

Alisha Arif/Alamy Stock Photo

Restructuring of Book Retailing

There are approximately 20,000 bookstores in the United States, but the number is declining as small, independent operations find it increasingly difficult to compete with chains such as Barnes & Noble, Follett's, and Books-A-Million. Even giant chain store Borders (1,249 stores under its own name and Waldenbooks) was forced to file for bankruptcy in 2011 and gradually closed all its stores. The remaining chains and the independents must still contend with online retailers like Amazon; discount stores such as Target, Walmart, and Costco; the explosion of POD; and the migration of books from paper to the electronic screens of laptops, tablet computers, e-readers, and smartphones.

Where the big stores have prospered it is because their size enables them to purchase inventory in bulk cheaply and then offer discounts to readers. Because their locations attract shoppers, they can also profitably stock nonbook merchandise such as audiobooks, CDs and vinyl records, computer games, calendars, magazines, and greeting cards for the drop-in trade. But high-volume, high-traffic operations tend to deal in high-volume books. To book traditionalists, this only encourages the industry's blockbuster mentality. When the largest bookstores in the country order only the biggest sellers, the small books get lost. When floor space is given over to Garfield coffee mugs and pop star calendars, there is even less room for small but potentially interesting books. Although big bookselling chains have their critics, they also have their defenders. At least the big titles, calendars, and cheap prices get people into bookstores, the argument goes. Once folks begin reading, even if it is less sophisticated stuff, they might eventually move on to more sophisticated material.

Independent bookstores are experiencing something of a renaissance. Today there are about 2,300 independent booksellers in the United States. And although this is a big decline from the 4,000 independent bookstores of the 1990s, the number of indies grew 49% between 2009 and 2019. Just as important, despite sales losses experienced by the big chains, independent bookstores saw their sales remain stable or even slightly increase over that time (**Shephard, 2020a**). They have accomplished this by using their small size and independence to their advantage, countering the chains and discount stores with expert, personalized service provided by a reading-loving staff, coffee and snack bars, cushioned chairs and sofas for slow browsing, intimate readings by favorite authors, and even neighborhood bookmobiles, book-filled vans that travel to readers. In fact, so successful have these strategies been that the big stores now are copying them. Barnes & Noble, for example, sponsors a program it calls Discover to promote notable first novels. Not only do these efforts emulate services more commonly associated with smaller independents, but they also help blunt some of the criticism suffered by the chains, specifically that they ignore new and smaller-selling books.

But the brick-and-mortar bookstore continues to face external pressure. The 2020 coronavirus shut-down is one example. Despite an overall increase in the sale of print books, bookstores suffered a 33% decline in sales, putting their renaissance to the test (**Alter, 2020b**). But their biggest threat continues to come from online retailers. Amazon is the best known of the online book sales services. It dominates book retailing, selling 45% of all new books sold every year and controlling 83% of all e-book sales (**The Editors, 2020**). This size gives Amazon outsized power in the book industry. Critics say Amazon is using its dominance of book retailing to extort high payments from the publishers, who have little choice but to sell their books on its site (a number of states have investigated the company for alleged abuse of its power; **Weise & McCabe, 2020**).

Further worrying its critics, Amazon has begun signing bestselling authors to produce books for its own Amazon Publishing imprints. The company, which already owns Kindle and Audible, giving it effective control over both the audio and e-book markets, also owns one of the world's most popular video streaming services, Amazon Prime. This puts it in a perfect position to offer big-name authors lucrative and unmatchable tie-in deals. Among its first two signing were Dean Koontz (30 paperback and hardcover bestsellers) and Patricia Cornwell (several bestsellers, including *Cause of Death*). Amazon now is involved in "every stage of the publishing process," warns critic Alex Shephard, "It is acquiring and publishing books, then marketing and selling them to customers. It is creating a marketplace that omits publishers altogether" (2020b).

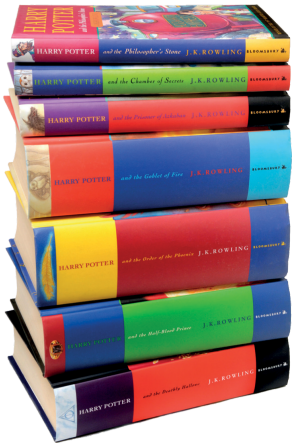
DEVELOPING MEDIA LITERACY SKILLS

The Lessons of Harry Potter

J. K. Rowling's series of books about youthful British sorcerer Harry Potter offers several important media literacy lessons. For example, its huge appeal to young people can be used to examine one element of media literacy, understanding content as a text providing insight into our culture and lives. Just why have these books resonated so strongly with young readers? The controversy surrounding the numerous efforts to have the series banned from schools and libraries as antireligious and anti-Christian and its status as the "most challenged" (censored) children's literature in the United States call into play the particular media literacy skill of developing the ability and willingness to effectively and meaningfully understand content.

The publishing industry classifies the *Harry Potter* books as young adult fiction. But their phenomenal reception by readers of all ages suggests these works not only have broader appeal but are in themselves something very special. The initial US printing of a *Harry Potter* book is about 14 million copies—100 times that of a normal best seller. The seven *Harry Potter* books combined have sold more than 500 million copies worldwide, and two-thirds of all American children have read at least one *Harry Potter* book. The *Potter* series has been published in over 68 languages (including Greek, Latin, and "Americanized English") in more than 200 countries. *Potter* books occupy the top four spots on the all-time fastest-selling book list.

An important element of media literacy is the development of an awareness of the impact of media, and there is evidence that *Harry Potter* has helped create a new generation of readers. When the series first appeared, horror writer Stephen King wrote, "If these millions of readers are awakened to the wonders and rewards of fantasy at 11 or 12 . . . well, when they get to age 16 or so, there's this guy named King" (as quoted in **Garchik, 2000**, p. D10). Diane Roback, children's book editor at *Publishers Weekly,* cited "'the Harry Potter halo effect,' in which children come into stores and libraries asking for books that resemble the Rowling series" (***USA Today*, 2000**, p. E4). When the final *Potter* book was released, a Scholastic Books survey of 500 *Harry Potter* readers aged 5 to 7 indicated that 51% said they did not read books for fun until they started reading the series. Three-quarters said reading the series had made them interested in reading other books (**Rich, 2007**).



▲ Harry Potter, the wizard who launched a million readers and made them better people, too.

PjrStudio/Alamy Stock Photo

But the series has had another, arguably more important impact. There is a wealth of scholarly research on the link between reading literary fiction and developing empathy for others, for example, **McCreary and Marchant's (2016)** "Reading and Empathy" and **Bal and Veltkamp's (2013)** "How Does Fiction Reading Influence Empathy? An Experimental Investigation of the Role of Emotional Transportation." The logic behind these studies is that reading literary fiction engages us with the psychological, social, and cultural complexities of life by requiring us to become someone else, transporting ourselves not only into the situations of others but into their minds. Reading *Harry Potter*, then, should have a similar impact, especially as he "is continually in contact with stigmatized groups. The 'muggles' get no respect in the wizarding world as they lack any magical ability. The 'half-bloods,' or 'mud-bloods'—wizards and witches descended from only one magical parent—don't fare much better, while the Lord Voldemort character believes that power should only be held by 'pure-blood' wizards" (**Stetka, 2014**).

Loris **Vezzali and her colleagues (2013)** tested *Harry Potter*'s power to build empathy in an article titled "The Greatest Magic of Harry Potter: Reducing Prejudice" and discovered just what media-literate people who recognize the power of well-crafted media messages would expect. Readers who read parts of the book where Harry had to deal with prejudice showed more empathy toward immigrants, homosexuals, and refugees than did those who read neutral passages. In an interview with science writer Bret **Stetka (2014)**, Professor Vezzali explained, "Unfortunately the news we read on a daily basis tells us we have so much work to do. But based on our work, fantasy books such as *Harry Potter* may be of great help to educators and parents in teaching tolerance."

MEDIA LITERACY CHALLENGE

Literacy: Limiting Access to Books in School

The *Harry Potter* books have been best sellers, but they have also been the frequent target of people who want to censor them from school libraries. You may never have read any of these works, but consider the possible reasons that parents might not want their children to read certain books without their knowledge, and then answer the following questions. To do so will call into play important components of media literacy: *the development of an understanding of the ethical and moral obligations of those who make (and dispense) media content* and *the awareness of media content as "texts" that provide insight into our culture.* Two media literacy skills are also involved: *the ability to distinguish emotional from reasoned reactions when responding to content* and *the ability to think critically about media messages.*

Your challenge is to answer these questions. Is it ever OK for groups outside the school (parents or concerned citizens, for example) to choose not to allow certain books in their schools? Why or why not? If you think it is appropriate to ask (or even insist) that movies, TV shows, video games, and recordings used in schools have warning labels or that parents who object to their children's exposure to that content be allowed to "opt out," would you hold books to those same controls? Should other in-school media be subject to greater control than books?

Why or why not? Is it better to have children reading controversial books as long as it encourages them to read, or would it be better if those children were not reading at all? Which is the greater "evil"? You can approach this challenge as either an opportunity for personal reflection, committing your thoughts to paper, or you can set it up as a debate, for example, the No Limits versus the Some Limits versus the Strong Limits.

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Cultural Forum Blue Column icon, Media Literacy Red Torch Icon, Using Media Green Gear icon, Developing Media book in starburst icon: ©McGraw Hill

Introduction to Chapter 4

About This Chapter

This chapter discusses one of the most underrated mediums in the United States: the newspaper. Books were the first mass medium, but newspapers redefined “mass” as literacy rates increased and publishers began creating content that was aimed at a broader audience. So much of modern media flows directly from the early ideas, structures, and practices of newspapers. Furthermore, as this chapter indicates, newspapers continue to be our primary source for journalism and reporting of all kinds. This chapter represents the beginning of the material that is most directly relevant to developing higher levels of media literacy, so make sure to pay attention.

WHAT TO FOCUS ON

Focus on the material about yellow journalism in this introduction. The history of newspapers is very important as well, especially the way newspapers developed in the U.S. from the colonies to the end of the yellow press period. It’s also important to have a strong sense of the scope and reach of modern papers in the U.S., so know the statistics on readership, reach, and the financial situation of the sector. We will definitely be focusing on convergence, consolidation, and conglomeration, so those sections are important too—though we will be focusing more on ownership trends and their implications than anything else.

Introductory Information About Newspapers

Focus on Critical Thinking: What Is Yellow Journalism, Where Did It Come From, and Why Is It Yellow?

The phrase **yellow journalism** (originally coined around 1897)[1] generally refers to a brand of journalism characterized by exaggeration, sensationalism, and an attitude that any sort of journalistic behavior is acceptable as long as it results in greater readership. In many ways, yellow journalism was a precursor to modern tabloid journalism—though the yellow journalism of the late 1800s and early 1900s took place within mainstream newspapers. Publications like *The New York* Post are probably the closest modern analog to the original yellow journalism, although nearly all modern journalism has been influenced by its methods. Not only did yellow journalism lead to a fascination with excess and sensationalism, it also influenced multiple strains of modern activist journalism.[2]

The upcoming chapter casually mentions that "yellow journalism" drew its name from a popular cartoon character of the time—The Yellow Kid—but there is a lot more to that story, all of which helps explain why journalism in America evolved the way it did. Let's start with a little more detail about that famous cartoon character.

In 1892, artist **Richard F. Outcault** became fascinated with both the image and the reality of homeless children in New York, where Outcault lived and worked. The enormous social and economic upheavals created by industrialization had contributed to the existing issue of poverty in the city, and by most counts there were well over 10,000 homeless children living on the streets of New York.[3] Social activists, photographers, and sketch artists had become transfixed by the sight of children sleeping in the street, and Outcault was inspired by the articles and artwork they produced. He began creating drawings featuring these "street urchins" for various humor magazines around New York in 1893. In 1894, newspaper owner and publisher **Joseph Pulitzer** was interested in publishing colored comics in his paper, *The New York World.* Outcault was hired, and the paper published his first comic panel in September of 1894. Later that year, he published his first color comic. Outcault called his cartoon "Hogan's Alley," a reference to the sorts of places homeless children in the city often slept, but it wasn't until early 1896 that the character of The Yellow Kid made his first real appearance in the comic strip.[4]

The Yellow Kid really caught the eye of the news-reading public, and his comic strip began drawing new readers to the *World.* Outcault's growing popularity and the singular image of The Yellow Kid soon attracted the attention of **William Randolph Hearst**, owner and publisher of *The New York Journal,* a rival paper to the *World*. Hearst offered Outcault an enormous raise to come work for the *Journal*, and Outcault accepted. In October of 1896, the new comic strip debuted in the *Journal* with a different title but still featuring The Yellow Kid. Not to be denied the revenue and attention of The Yellow Kid, Outcault's old paper, the *World*, hired artist **George Luks** to keep creating Hogan's Alley comic strips. So, for about a year and a half, the two biggest rival newspapers in New York had dueling versions of the same comic strip. This situation was widely mocked by journalists and commentators from other papers, and the public's fascination with The Yellow Kid eventually faded. By early 1898, both papers stopped publishing their respective cartoons featuring the street urchin.

Before moving on to discuss the Yellow Kid's relationship to the concept of yellow journalism, it's important to stop and reflect on exactly what the cartoon character was. Outcault drew The Yellow Kid as a bald, mostly toothless homeless orphan. The Kid—whose name in the comic was Mickey Dugan—was usually drawn wearing nothing but a yellow oversized nightshirt. He was sometimes pictured toasting one group or another with some sort of alcoholic beverage. While Outcault's comic strip was rarely directly political, it was clearly meant as social commentary.

This is important because The Yellow Kid is so often connected to the entire period of journalism in which his comic strip flourished. It seems almost required for commentators on "yellow journalism" to note that the phrase arose from The Yellow Kid—specifically, they usually report, this phrase was meant to invoke public disgust over the competition between Pulitzer and Hearst over Outcault's comic. However, communication scholar and former journalist W. Joseph Campbell has argued persuasively that the term "yellow journalism" was popularized by **Ervin Wardman**, then-editor of the *New York Press*.[5] Moreover, Campbell argues that the term was not originally a reference to the fight over Outcault and his comic creation. Rather, "the appearance and spread of the term coincided with what became a vigorous effort in metropolitan New York to denigrate and marginalize" Pulitzer's and Hearst's newspapers.[6] Wardman and others referred to what Pulitzer and Hearst were doing as "yellow journalism" or "yellow-kid journalism" because the comic strip was an easy way to identify the two papers and because the word "yellow" had some other colloquial meanings at the time having to do with excess and illicit content, not because the fight over the comic itself was somehow considered shameful.

When you see the phrase "yellow journalism"—and you probably will at some point, because the term is still in common use among media critics in particular—remember the complexity of the term. Those who use it are usually referring to some sort of activity that is shamelessly interested in profit over journalistic quality. However, The Yellow Kid himself was a serious attempt to draw the public's attention to an important social justice issue that still exists. We still have not seriously dealt with issues of childhood poverty or homelessness. It's worth remembering that the term "yellow journalism" was popularized, in part, as a public relations effort meant to mock two papers by identifying them with something that was an admirable attempt to use comic art to highlight the problems of homeless children.

What to Study

KEY WORDS

Yellow Press/Yellow Journalism

Yellow Kid

Acta Diurna

Corantos

Broadsides/Broadsheets

Boston News-Letter

Alien and Sedition Acts

Penny Press

Freedom's Journal

The North Star

Wire services

The New York Associated Press

Newspaper chains

Pass-along readership

Feature syndicates

Newsholes

Paywall

Click bait articles

Soft vs. Hard news

IMPORTANT PEOPLE

Richard Outcault

Joseph Pulitzer

William Randolph Hearst

George Luks

Ervin Wardman

Benjamin Harris

John Campbell

John Peter Zenger

Benjamin Day

James Gordon Bennett and the importance of the *New York Morning Herald*

Horace Greeley and the importance of the *New York Tribune*

Frederick Douglass and the importance of *The Ram's Horn*

Robert Sengstacke Abott and the importance of the *Chicago Defender*

QUESTIONS YOU SHOULD BE ABLE TO ANSWER

- What was "Hogan's Alley," how did it come to be, who was The Yellow Kid, and what did that have to do with yellow journalism?
- What is the actual relationship between Outcault's comic strip and the phrase "yellow journalism"?
- What is the general history of the newspaper, and when did the word "newspaper" enter the English language?
- Roughly when and how did newspapers establish themselves in the American colonies?
- What did Peter Zenger's trial have to do with freedom of the press? What about the Alien and Sedition Acts?
- What made newspapers more popular in the 1800s?
- When did the penny press and yellow press periods begin, what distinguished them, and what is their importance in the history of newspapers in the U.S.?
- What is the importance of *Freedom's Journal*, first published in 1827?
- Roughly how many foreign language newspapers were there in the U.S. by 1880?
- When did the first wire services arrive in the U.S., and what impacts did they have on the newspaper industry?
- What are the statistics on the readership and scope of newspapers in the U.S. today?
- What factors at the end of World War II altered the newspaper-reader relationship, and when did the modern decline in newspaper circulation begin?
- How many daily newspapers are there today? How does this compare to 1990? What percentage of American newspapers have closed since 2004? What news sources do Americans use most?
- What is the state of advertising revenue in newspapers today? What are the trends?
- What is the trend in concentration of ownership of newspapers? How many American cities have competing papers? Roughly what percentage of the nation's daily newspapers are owned by the top 10 companies? How much of the newspaper industry is owned by hedge funds?

- Which age groups are most likely to read a print newspaper daily? What age groups are most likely to get their news from television?
- What potential media literacy issue is raised by the "softening" of newspapers?

NOTES

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Newspapers

4



Has reading the newspaper become old-fashioned?

Joseph McKeown/Picture Post/Hulton Archive/Getty Images

100 B.C.E. ▶ Acta Diurna in Caesar's Rome

1600

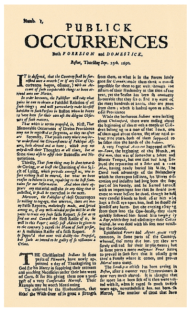
1620 Corantos
~1625 Broadsides
1641 Diurnals
~1660 "Newspaper" enters the language
1665 *Oxford Gazette*
1690 ▶ *Publick Occurrences Both Foreign and Domestick*



Pixtal/age fotostock

1700

1704 *Boston News-Letter*
1721 *New-England Courant's* James Franklin jailed for "scandalous libels"
1729 ▶ Benjamin Franklin's *Pennsylvania Gazette*
1734 The Zenger Trial
1765 Stamp Act
1791 The First Amendment to the Constitution
1798 The Alien and Sedition Acts



Courtesy of John Frost Historical Newspapers



H.S. Photos/Alamy Stock Photo

1800

1827 The first African American newspaper, *Freedom's Journal*
1828 *Cherokee Phoenix*
1833 The penny press
1844 Introduction of the telegraph
1847 Frederick Douglass's *The North Star*
1856 The New York Associated Press
1883 Pulitzer's *New York World,* yellow journalism
1889 ▶ *The Wall Street Journal*

1900

1905 *Chicago Defender*
1907 United Press International
1908 *Christian Science Monitor*
1909 International News Service
1970 Newspaper Preservation Act
1982 *USA TODAY*



Jill Braaten/McGraw Hill

2000

2007 Murdoch buys *The Wall Street Journal*
2009 *Christian Science Monitor* ceases daily publication; *Rocky Mountain News* shuttered; Internet overtakes newspapers as news source
2012 Association of Alternative Newsweeklies becomes Association of Alternative Newsmedia
2016 Number of people employed in digital publishing passes number working at newspapers; Newspaper Association of America becomes the News Media Alliance and begins accepting digital-only news sites as members; American Society of News Editors sets membership dues by monthly web traffic; Facebook offers free online training for journalists
2018 ▶ *Report for America; Village Voice* shuttered
2019 *The North Star is* reborn online
2020 Coronavirus in the US; Google begins payment to high quality news outlets
2021 ▶ *The Village Voice returns*



Courtesy of The Village Voice

"YOU GOT A JOB AS A NEWSPAPER REPORTER?"

"I told you that's what I wanted to be." "And I told you that newspaper employment is down 60% since 1990, and it's gotten so bad that even the American Society of News Editors stopped reporting newsroom employment numbers."

"And I'll remind you again, journalism is not just a job, it's how people who do it fulfill their destiny. It's my destiny and I found a way to meet it."

"What, a low-paid internship somewhere?" "Nope. You ever hear of AmeriCorps, where people get paid for public service work in education or helping the environment? There's a journalism equivalent, Report for America, funded by donors worried about what's happening to local papers. They're training me, placing me

in an understaffed newsroom somewhere, and paying half my $45,000 annual salary. The local paper and local donors will make up the rest. There'll be 1,000 more like me in the next few years."

"Forty-five thousand dollars?" "Yup, better than the median reporter's salary in a lot of big cities."

In this chapter, we examine the massive changes that have given birth to organizations like Report for America ("About," 2021) and what they mean for the relationship between the newspaper and its readers. And there is indeed much to say about a medium that has lost 52% of its employment, nearly 150,000 jobs, since 2009 (Johnson, 2020) and has suffered 300 newspaper closures in 2019 and 2020 alone (Dobbins, 2021), and yet whose major function, journalism, continues to attract a growing number of young people to its ranks (Orso, 2019).

We start with a look at the medium's roots, beginning with the first papers and following them from Europe to colonial America, where many of the traditions of today's free press were set. We study the cultural changes that led to the creation of the penny press and to competition between these mass circulation dailies that gave us "yellow journalism."

We then review the modern newspaper in terms of its size and scope. We discuss different types of newspapers and the importance of newspapers as an advertising medium. The wire and feature services, important providers of newspaper content, are also highlighted.

We then detail how the relationship between medium and audience is shifting as a result of the loss of competition within the industry, hypercommercialism in the guise of commercial pressure on papers' editorial content, the positive and negative impacts of new and converging technology, newspapers' gravitation to online formats, and changes in the nature of newspaper readership. Finally, we test our media literacy skills through a discussion of how to read the newspaper—for example, interpreting the relative positioning of stories.

A Short History of Newspapers

The opening vignette makes an important point about contemporary newspapers—they are in a state of **disruptive transition**—radical change brought about by the introduction of a new technology or product—but they are working hard and often successfully to secure new identities for themselves in an increasingly crowded media environment. As a medium and as an industry, newspapers are in the midst of a significant change in their role and operation. The changing relationship between newspapers and readers is part of this upheaval. Newspapers in paper form are still around, but they are increasingly likely to be read in digital form.

The Earliest Newspapers

In Caesar's time, Rome had a newspaper, the **Acta Diurna** (actions of the day). It was carved on a tablet and posted on a wall after each meeting of the senate. Its circulation was one, and there is no reliable measure of its total readership. However, it does show that people have always wanted to know what was happening and that others have helped them do so.

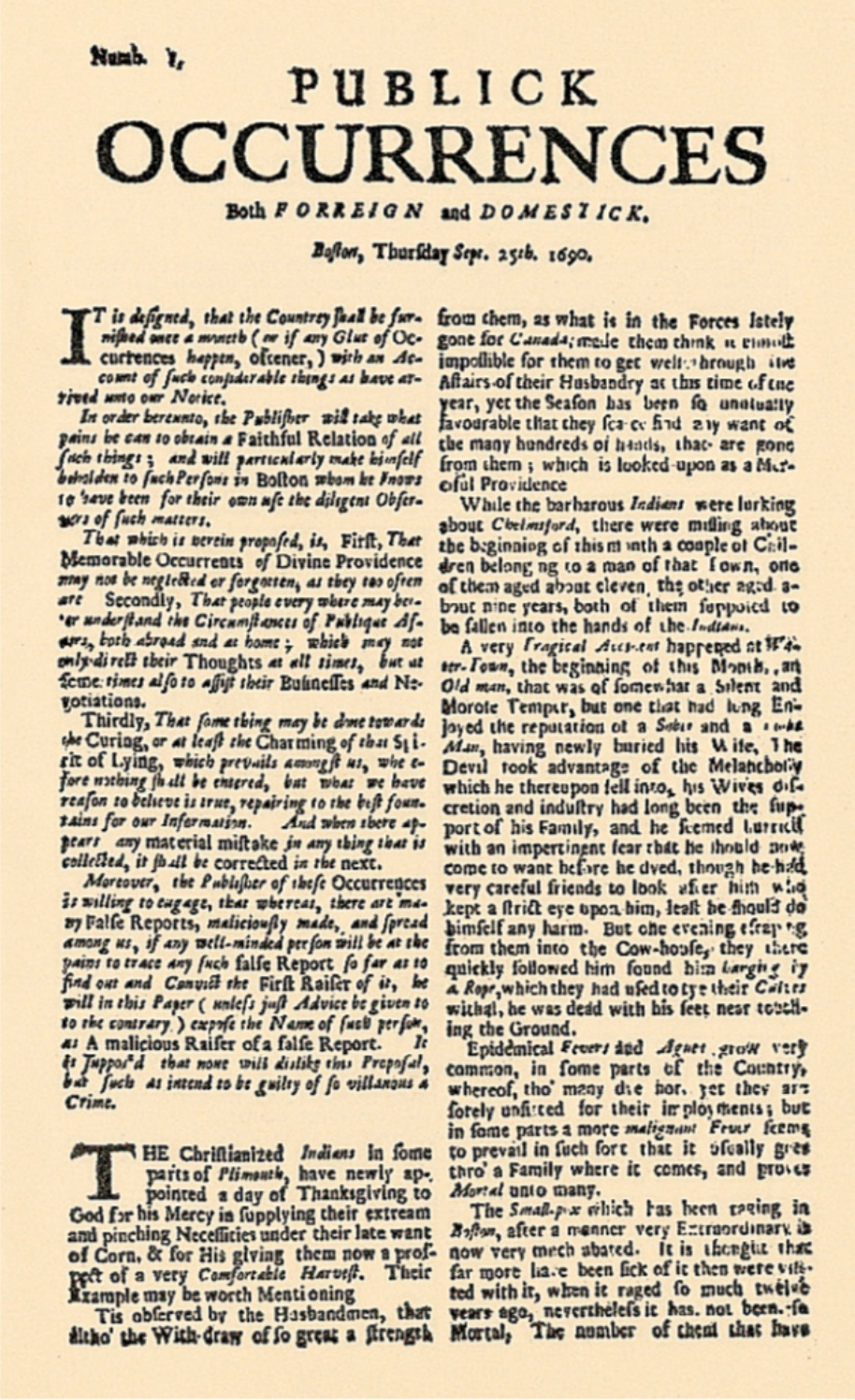
The newspapers we recognize today have their roots in 17th-century Europe. **Corantos**, one-page news sheets about specific events, were printed in English in Holland in 1620 and imported to England by British booksellers who were eager to satisfy public demand for information about the continental European happenings that eventually led to what we now call the Thirty Years' War.

Englishmen Nathaniel Butter, Thomas Archer, and Nicholas Bourne eventually began printing their own occasional news sheets, using the same title for consecutive editions. They stopped publishing in 1641, the same year that regular, daily accounts of local news started appearing in other news sheets. These true forerunners of our daily newspaper were called **diurnals**, but by the 1660s the word *newspaper* had entered the English language (**Lepore, 2009**).

Political power struggles in England at this time boosted the fledgling medium, as partisans on the side of the monarchy and those supporting Parliament published papers to bolster their positions. When the monarchy prevailed, it granted monopoly publication rights to the *Oxford Gazette*, the official voice of the Crown. Founded in 1665 and later renamed the *London Gazette*, this journal used a formula of foreign news, official information, royal proclamations, and local news that became the model for the first colonial newspapers.

COLONIAL NEWSPAPERS

In the colonies, bookseller/print shops became the focal point for the exchange of news and information, which led to the beginning of the colonial newspaper. It was at these establishments that **broadsides** (sometimes referred to as **broadsheets**), single-sheet announcements or accounts of events imported from England, would be posted. In 1690, Boston bookseller and printer (and coffeehouse owner) Benjamin Harris printed his own broadside, *Publick Occurrences Both Forreign and Domestick.* Intended for continuous publication, the country's first paper lasted only one day; Harris had been critical of local and European dignitaries, and he had also failed to obtain a license.



Numb. 1.

PUBLICK

OCCURRENCES

Both *FORREIGN* and *DOMESTICK*.

Boston, Thurſday *Sept.* 25*th.* 1690.

IT is deſigned, that the Country ſhall be furniſhed once a moneth (or if any Glut of Occurrences happen, oftener,) with an Account of ſuch conſiderable things as have arrived unto our Notice.

In order hereunto, the Publiſher will take what pains he can to obtain a Faithful Relation *of all ſuch things; and will particularly make himſelf beholden to ſuch Perſons in* Boſton *whom he Knows to have been for their own uſe the diligent Obſervers of ſuch matters.*

That which is herein propoſed, is, Firſt, *That* Memorable Occurrents of Divine Providence *may not be neglected or forgotten, as they too often are* Secondly, *That people every where may better underſtand the Circumſtances of Publique Affairs, both abroad and at home; which may not only direct their* Thoughts *at all times, but at ſome times alſo to aſſiſt their* Buſineſſes *and* Negotiations.

Thirdly, *That ſome thing may be done towards the* Curing, *or at leaſt the* Charming *of that Spirit of* Lying, *which prevails amongſt us, wherefore nothing ſhall be entered, but what we have reaſon to believe is true, repairing to the beſt fountains for our Information. And when there appears any* material miſtake *in any thing that is collected, it ſhall be* corrected *in the next.*

Moreover, the Publiſher of theſe Occurrences *is willing to engage, that whereas, there are many* Falſe Reports, *maliciouſly made, and ſpread among us, if any well-minded perſon will be at the pains to trace any ſuch* falſe Report *ſo far as to find out and Convict the* First Raiſer *of it, he will in this Paper (unleſs juſt Advice be given to to the contrary) expoſe the Name of ſuch perſon, as* A malicious Raiſer of a falſe Report. *It is Suppoſ'd that none will diſlike this Propoſal, but ſuch as intend to be guilty of ſo villanous a Crime.*

THE Chriſtianized *Indians* in ſome parts of *Plimouth*, have newly appointed a day of Thanksgiving to God for his Mercy in ſupplying their extream and pinching Neceſſities under their late want of Corn, & for His giving them now a proſpect of a very *Comfortable Harveſt*. Their Example may be worth Mentioning

'Tis obſerved by the Husbandmen, that altho' the With-draw of ſo great a ſtrength from them, as what is in the Forces lately gone for *Canada*; made them think it almoſt impoſſible for them to get well through the Affairs of their Husbandry at this time of the year, yet the Seaſon has been ſo unuſually favourable that they ſcarce find any want of the many hundreds of hands, that are gone from them; which is looked upon as a Merciful Providence

While the barbarous *Indians* were lurking about *Chelmsford*, there were miſſing about the beginning of this month a couple of Children belonging to a man of that Town, one of them aged about eleven, the other aged about nine years, both of them ſuppoſed to be fallen into the hands of the *Indians*.

A very *Tragical Accident* happened at *Water-Town*, the beginning of this Month, an *Old man*, that was of ſomewhat a Silent and Morote Temper, but one that had long Enjoyed the reputation of a *Sober* and a *Juſt Man*, having newly buried his Wife, The Devil took advantage of the Melancholy which he thereupon fell into, his Wives diſcretion and induſtry had long been the ſupport of his Family, and he ſeemed turrified with an impertingent fear that he ſhould come to want before he dyed, though he had very careful friends to look after him who kept a ſtrict eye upon him, leaſt he ſhould do himſelf any harm. But one evening ſtraying from them into the Cow-houſe, they there quickly followed him found him *hanging by a Rope*, which they had uſed to tye their *Cattle* withal, he was dead with his feet near touching the Ground.

Epidemical *Fevers* and *Agues* grow very common, in ſome parts of the Country, whereof, tho' many die not, yet they are ſorely unfitted for their imployments; but in ſome parts a more *malignant Fever* ſeems to prevail in ſuch ſort that it uſually goes thro' a Family where it comes, and proves *Mortal* unto many.

The *Small-pox* which has been raging in *Boſton*, after a manner very Extraordinary is now very much abated. It is thought that far more have been ſick of it then were viſited with it, when it raged ſo much twelve years ago, nevertheleſs it has not been ſo Mortal, The number of them that have

▲ The first daily newspaper to appear in the 13 colonies, *Publick Occurrences Both Forreign and Domestick* lasted all of one edition.

Courtesy of John Frost Historical Newspapers

More successful was Boston postmaster John Campbell, whose 1704 *Boston News-Letter* survived until the Revolution. The paper featured foreign news, reprints of articles from England, government

announcements, and shipping news. It was dull and expensive. Nonetheless, it established the newspaper in the colonies.



▾ Benjamin Franklin published America's first political cartoon— "Join, or Die," a rallying call for the colonies—in his *Pennsylvania Gazette* in 1754.

H.S. Photos/Alamy Stock Photo

The *Boston News-Letter* was able to survive in part because of government subsidies. With government support came government control, but the buildup to the Revolution helped establish the medium's independence. In 1721, Boston had three papers. James Franklin's *New-England Courant* was the only one publishing without authority. The *Courant* was popular and controversial, but when it criticized the Massachusetts governor, Franklin was jailed for printing "scandalous libels." When released, he returned to his old ways, earning himself and the *Courant* a publishing ban, which he circumvented by installing his younger brother Benjamin as nominal publisher. Benjamin Franklin soon moved to Philadelphia, and without his leadership, the *Courant* was out of business in 3 years. Its lasting legacy, however, was demonstrating that a newspaper with popular support could indeed challenge authority.

In Philadelphia, Benjamin Franklin established a print shop and later, in 1729, took over a failing newspaper, which he revived and renamed the *Pennsylvania Gazette.* By combining the income from his bookshop and printing business with that from his popular daily, Franklin could run the *Gazette* with significant independence. Even though he held the contract for Philadelphia's official printing, he was unafraid to criticize those in authority. In addition, he began to develop advertising support, which helped shield his newspaper from government control by decreasing its dependence on official printing contracts for survival. Benjamin Franklin demonstrated that financial independence could lead to editorial independence. It was not, however, a guarantee.

In 1734, *New York Weekly Journal* publisher John Peter Zenger was jailed for criticizing that colony's royal governor. The charge was seditious libel, and the verdict was based not on the truth or falsehood of the printed words but on whether they had been printed. The criticisms had been published, so Zenger was clearly guilty. But his attorney, Andrew Hamilton, argued to the jury, "For the words

themselves must be libelous, that is, false, scandalous and seditious, or else we are not guilty" (in **Pusey, 2013**). Zenger's peers agreed, and he was freed. The Zenger trial became a powerful symbol of colonial newspaper independence from the Crown.

NEWSPAPERS AFTER INDEPENDENCE

After the Revolution, the new government of the United States had to determine for itself just how free a press it was willing to tolerate. When the first Congress convened under the new Constitution in 1790, the nation's founders debated, drafted, and adopted the first 10 amendments to the Constitution, called the **Bill of Rights**. The **First Amendment** reads:

> Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peacefully to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.

But a mere 8 years later, fearful of the subversive activities of foreigners sympathetic to France, Congress passed a group of four laws known collectively as the **Alien and Sedition Acts**. The Sedition Acts made illegal writing, publishing, or printing "any false scandalous and malicious writing" about the president, Congress, or the federal government. So unpopular were these laws with a citizenry who had just waged a war of independence against similar limits on their freedom of expression that they were not renewed when Congress reconsidered them two years later in 1800. See **Chapter 14** for more detail on the ongoing commitment to the First Amendment, freedom of the press, and open expression in the United States.

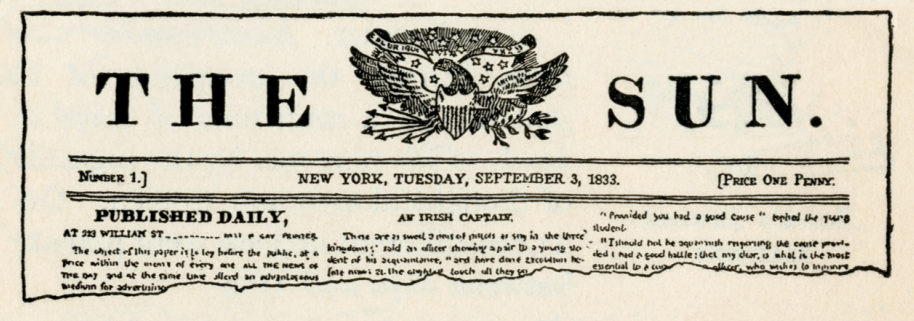
The Modern Newspaper Emerges

At the turn of the 19th century, New York City provided all the ingredients necessary for a new kind of audience for a new kind of newspaper and a new kind of journalism. The island city was densely populated, a center of culture, commerce, and politics, and especially because of the waves of immigrants that had come to its shores, demographically diverse. Add to this the growing literacy among working people, and conditions were ripe for the **penny press**, one-cent newspapers for everyone. Benjamin Day's September 3, 1833, issue of the *New York Sun* was the first of the penny papers. Day's innovation was to price his paper so inexpensively that it would attract a large readership, which could then be "sold" to advertisers. Day succeeded because he anticipated a new kind of reader. He filled the *Sun*'s pages with police and court reports, crime stories, entertainment news, and human interest stories. Because the paper lived up to its motto, "The Sun shines for all," there was little of the elite political and business information that had characterized earlier papers.

Soon there were penny papers in all the major cities. Among the most important was James Gordon Bennett's *New York Morning Herald.* Although more sensationalistic than the *Sun*, the *Herald* pioneered the correspondent system, placing reporters in Washington, DC, and other major American cities as well as abroad. Correspondents filed their stories by means of the telegraph, invented in 1844. Horace Greeley's *New York Tribune* was an important penny paper as well. Its nonsensationalistic, issues-oriented, and humanitarian reporting established the mass newspaper as a powerful medium of social action.

THE PEOPLE'S MEDIUM

People typically excluded from the social, cultural, and political mainstream quickly saw the value of the mass newspaper. The first African American newspaper was *Freedom's Journal*, published initially in 1827 by John B. Russwurm and the Reverend Samuel Cornish. Others soon followed, but it was Frederick Douglass who made best use of the new mass circulation style in his newspaper *The Ram's Horn*, founded expressly to challenge the editorial policies of Benjamin Day's *Sun.* Although this particular effort failed, Douglass had established himself and the minority press as a viable voice for those otherwise silenced.



THE SUN.

NEW YORK, TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 3, 1833.

PUBLISHED DAILY,

AN IRISH CAPTAIN.

▾ Volume 1, Number 1 of Benjamin Day's *New York Sun,* the first of the penny papers.

North Wind Picture Archives

Douglass's *The North Star*, founded in 1847 with the masthead slogan "Right is of no Sex—Truth is of no Color—God is the Father of us all, and we are all Brethren," was the most influential African American newspaper before the Civil War. And because its message is timeless, *The North Star* was reborn as an online newspaper in 2019.

The most influential African American newspaper after the Civil War, and the first to be a commercial success (its predecessors typically were subsidized by political and church groups), was the *Chicago Defender.* First published on May 5, 1905, by Robert Sengstacke Abbott, the *Defender* eventually earned a nationwide circulation of more than 230,000. After Abbott declared May 15, 1917, the date of "the Great Northern Drive," the *Defender*'s central editorial goal was to encourage southern African Americans to move north.

"I beg of you, my brothers, to leave that benighted land. You are free men. . . . Get out of the South," Abbott editorialized (in **Fitzgerald, 1999**, p. 18). The paper would regularly contrast horrific accounts of southern lynchings with northern African American success stories. Within two years of the start of the Great Drive, more than 500,000 former slaves and their families moved north. Within two more years, another 500,000 followed.

Native Americans found early voice in papers such as the *Cherokee Phoenix*, founded in 1828 in Georgia, and the *Cherokee Rose Bud*, which began operation 20 years later in Oklahoma. The rich tradition of the Native American newspaper is maintained today around the country in publications such as the Oglala Sioux *Lakota Country Times* and the Shoshone- Bannock *Sho-Ban News*, as well as on the World Wide Web. For example, the *Cherokee Observer*, the *Navajo Times*, and *Indian Country News* can all be found online.

Throughout this early period of the popularization of the newspaper, numerous foreign-language dailies also began operation, primarily in major cities in which immigrants tended to settle. By 1880, there were more than 800 foreign-language newspapers published across America in German, Polish, Italian, Spanish, and various Scandinavian languages (**Sloan, Stovall, & Startt, 1993**). As you'll see

later in this chapter, the modern foreign language press remains an important part of the contemporary newspaper environment.

THE FIRST WIRE SERVICES

In 1848, six large New York papers, including the *Sun*, the *Herald*, and the *Tribune*, decided to pool efforts and share expenses collecting news from foreign ships docking at the city's harbor. After determining rules of membership and other organizational issues, in 1856 the papers established the first news-gathering (and distribution) organization, the New York Associated Press. Other domestic **wire services**, originally named for their reliance on the telegraph but later renamed "news services," followed—the Associated Press in 1900, the United Press in 1907, and the International News Service in 1909.

This innovation, with its assignment of correspondents to both foreign and domestic bureaus, had a number of important implications. First, it greatly expanded the breadth and scope of coverage a newspaper could offer its readers. This was a boon to dailies wanting to attract as many readers as possible. Greater coverage of distant domestic news helped unite an expanding country while encouraging even more expansion. The United States was a nation of immigrants, and news from people's homelands drew more readers. As important, newspapers were able to reduce expenses (and increase profits) because they no longer needed to have their own reporters in all locations.

YELLOW JOURNALISM

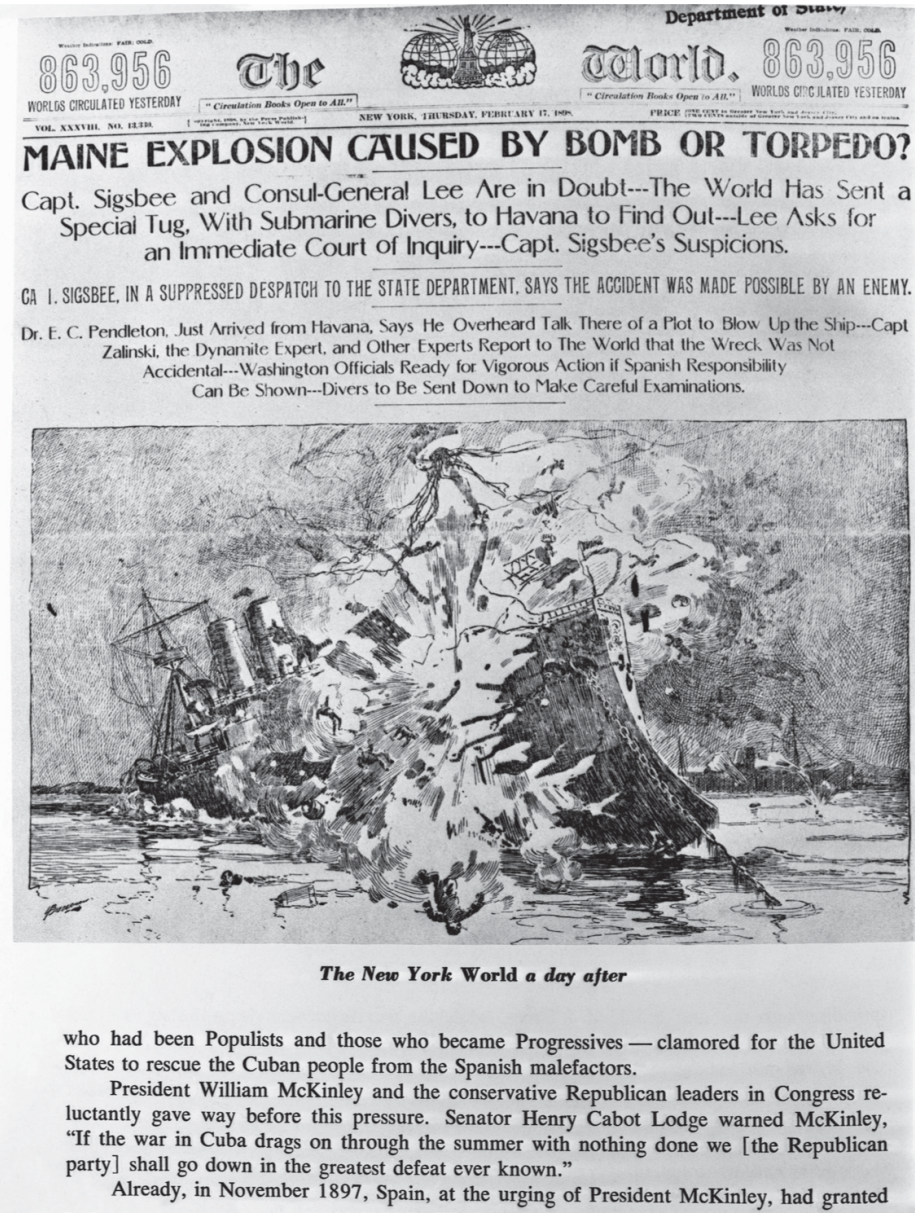
In 1883 Hungarian immigrant Joseph Pulitzer bought the troubled *New York World.* Adopting a populist approach to the news, he brought a crusading, activist style of coverage to numerous turn-of-the-century social problems—growing slums, labor tensions, and failing farms, to name a few. The audience for his "new journalism" was the "common man," and he succeeded in reaching readers with light, sensationalistic news coverage, extensive use of illustrations, and circulation-building stunts and promotions (for example, an around-the-world balloon flight). Ad revenues and circulation figures exploded.

Soon there were other new journalists. William Randolph Hearst applied Pulitzer's successful formula to his *San Francisco Examiner*, and then in 1895, he took on Pulitzer himself in New York by purchasing the failing *New York Morning Journal.* The competition between Hearst's *Morning Journal* and Pulitzer's *World* was so intense that it debased newspapers and journalism as a whole, which is somewhat ironic in that Pulitzer later founded the prize for excellence in journalism that still bears his name.

Drawing its name from the Yellow Kid, a popular cartoon character of the time, **yellow journalism** was a study in excess—sensational sex, crime, and disaster news; giant headlines; heavy use of illustrations; and reliance on cartoons and color. It was successful at first, and other papers around the country adopted all or part of its style. Although public reaction to the excesses of yellow journalism soon led to its decline, traces of its popular features remain. Large headlines, big front-page pictures, extensive use of photos and illustrations, and cartoons are characteristic even of today's best newspapers.

The years between the era of yellow journalism and the coming of television were a time of remarkable growth in the development of newspapers. From 1910 to the beginning of World War II, daily newspaper subscriptions doubled and ad revenues tripled. In 1910, there were 2,600 daily papers in the United States, more than at any time before or since. In 1923, the American Society of Newspaper

Editors issued the "Canons of Journalism and Statement of Principles" in an effort to restore order and respectability after the yellow era. The opening sentence of the Canons was, "The right of a newspaper to attract and hold readers is restricted by nothing but considerations of public welfare." The wire services internationalized. United Press International started gathering news from Japan in 1909 and was covering South America and Europe by 1921. In response to the competition from radio and magazines for advertising dollars, newspapers began consolidating into **newspaper chains**—papers in different cities across the country owned by a single company. Hearst and Scripps were among the most powerful chains in the 1920s. For all practical purposes, the modern newspaper had now emerged. The next phase of the medium's life, as we'll soon see, begins with the coming of television.



Department of State

863,956 WORLDS CIRCULATED YESTERDAY

The World.

"Circulation Books Open to All."

863,956 WORLDS CIRCULATED YESTERDAY

NEW YORK, THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 17, 1898.

MAINE EXPLOSION CAUSED BY BOMB OR TORPEDO?

Capt. Sigsbee and Consul-General Lee Are in Doubt---The World Has Sent a Special Tug, With Submarine Divers, to Havana to Find Out---Lee Asks for an Immediate Court of Inquiry---Capt. Sigsbee's Suspicions.

CAPT. SIGSBEE, IN A SUPPRESSED DESPATCH TO THE STATE DEPARTMENT, SAYS THE ACCIDENT WAS MADE POSSIBLE BY AN ENEMY.

Dr. E. C. Pendleton, Just Arrived from Havana, Says He Overheard Talk There of a Plot to Blow Up the Ship---Capt Zalinski, the Dynamite Expert, and Other Experts Report to The World that the Wreck Was Not Accidental---Washington Officials Ready for Vigorous Action if Spanish Responsibility Can Be Shown---Divers to Be Sent Down to Make Careful Examinations.

The New York World a day after

who had been Populists and those who became Progressives — clamored for the United States to rescue the Cuban people from the Spanish malefactors.

President William McKinley and the conservative Republican leaders in Congress reluctantly gave way before this pressure. Senator Henry Cabot Lodge warned McKinley, "If the war in Cuba drags on through the summer with nothing done we [the Republican party] shall go down in the greatest defeat ever known."

Already, in November 1897, Spain, at the urging of President McKinley, had granted

▲ Many yellow papers, especially those of Pulitzer and Hearst, used the sinking of the *Maine* as a call to war with Spain, hoping that war coverage would build circulation.

Bettmann/Getty Images

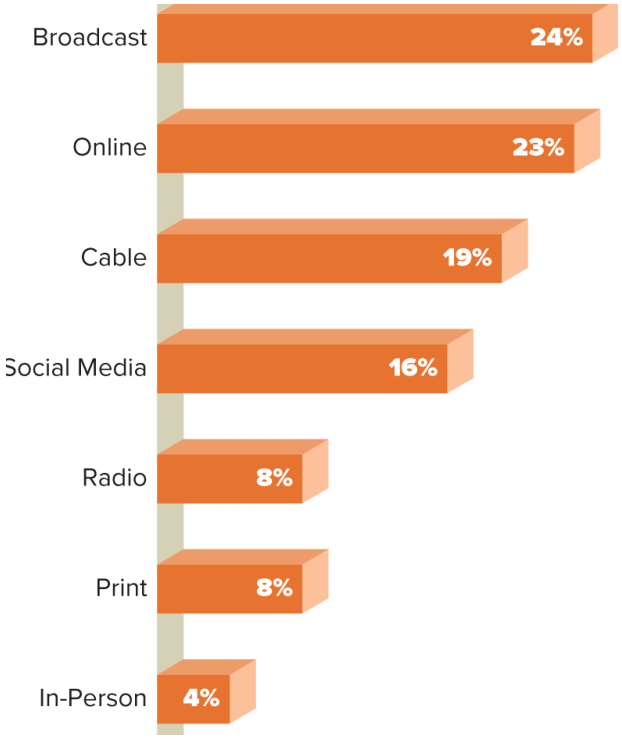
Newspapers and Their Audiences

Six in 10 American adults read a daily paper every week, although not necessarily on printed paper (**Mansi Media, 2019**).

The industry that serves those readers looks quite different from the one that operated before television became a dominant medium. There are now fewer papers and different types of papers. They deliver the news on different platforms, and more newspapers are part of large chains.

The advent of television at the end of World War II coincided with several important social and cultural changes in the United States. Shorter work hours, more leisure, more expendable cash, movement to the suburbs, and women joining the workforce in greater numbers all served to alter the newspaper–reader relationship. Today, continuing a long and steady decline beginning in the 1970s, daily print newspaper circulation has reached its lowest point since 1940 (**Grieco, 2020**).

The number of daily newspapers also continues to fall. There were more than 1,600 in 1990; the current total is around 1,200. Big-name dailies such as the *Baltimore Examiner*, *New York Sun*, *Honolulu Advertiser*, *Albuquerque Tribune*, *Cincinnati Post*, *Kentucky Post*, and *Birmingham Post-Herald* have closed shop. Denver's 150-year-old *Rocky Mountain News* has folded, and the 146-year-old *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* converted to Web-only. In 2016, Pittsburgh had two daily print newspapers; in 2019, it had none (**Conte, 2020**). The 101-year-old *Christian Science Monitor* shut down its print operation to become an online daily and a weekend newsmagazine. One in five American newspapers has closed shop since 2004. Circulation has suffered years of decline, and ad revenues are falling at a rapid pace, an ironic state of affairs as the local newspaper is not only Americans' most-trusted source for news, but the country's most prolific generators of journalism (**Sullivan, 2020**; **Institute for Public Relations, 2019**). Nonetheless, today's newspapers are buffeted by technological and economic change like no other traditional medium. You can see which news sources Americans use most in **Figure 4.1**. Note where print falls.



▲ **Figure 4.1** Which News Sources Do Americans Use the Most?

Source: "What Americans," 2020.

Scope and Structure of the Newspaper Industry

Today, there are roughly 7,000 newspapers operating in the United States. Of these, roughly 17% are dailies, and the rest are weeklies (75%) and semiweek-lies (8%). They have a combined print circulation of nearly 100 million. **Pass-along readership—**readers who did not originally purchase the paper— brings 100 million people a day in touch with a daily and 200 million a week in touch with a weekly. But as we've seen, overall print circulation is falling despite a growing population. Therefore, to have success and to ensure their future, newspapers have had to adjust.

We've cited statistics about dailies and weeklies, but these categories actually include many different types of papers. Let's take a closer look at some of them.

National Daily Newspapers

We traditionally think of the newspaper as a local medium, our town's paper. But two national daily newspapers enjoy large circulations and significant social and political impact. The older and more respected is *The Wall Street Journal*, founded in 1889 by Charles Dow and Edward Jones. It has been ranked the most credible newspaper in every Pew Research newspaper study since 1985. Its focus is on the world of business, although its definition of business is broad. The *Journal* has a paid daily circulation, print and digital, of just short of 3 million, and an average household income of its readers of over $275,000 makes it a favorite for upscale advertisers. In 2007, it became part of Rupert Murdoch's News Corp. media empire.

The other national daily is *USA Today.* Founded in 1982, it calls itself "The Nation's Newspaper," and despite early derision from industry pros for its lack of depth and apparent dependence on style over substance, it has become a serious national newspaper with significant global influence. Today, the paper's daily circulation of over 4 million, including special branded editions and digital subscriptions, suggests that readers welcome its mix of short, lively, upbeat stories; full-color graphics; state-by-state news and sports briefs; and ample use of easy-to-read illustrated graphs and tables.

Large Metropolitan Dailies

To be a daily, a paper must be published at least five times a week. The circulation of big-city dailies has dropped over the past 30 years, and they continue to lose circulation at a rate approaching 10% a year. Many older, established papers, including the *Philadelphia Bulletin* and the *Washington Star,* have stilled their presses in recent years. When the *Chicago Daily News* closed its doors, it had the sixth-highest circulation in the country.

As big cities cease to be industrial centers, homes, jobs, and interests have turned away from downtown. Those large metropolitan dailies that are succeeding have used a number of strategies to cut costs and to attract and keep more suburban-oriented readers. Some publish **zoned editions—**suburban or regional versions of the paper—to attract readers and to combat competition for advertising dollars from the suburban papers. However, once-customary features such as these zoned

editions (*Providence Journal*), stand-alone book review sections (*Chicago Tribune*, *Washington Post*), weekly magazines (*Los Angeles Times*), classified sections (*Cincinnati Enquirer*, *Boston Globe*), 7-days-a-week publishing (*New Orleans Times-Picayune*), and even daily home delivery (*Cleveland Plain Dealer*) are disappearing as papers big and small battle declining ad revenue and rising production and distribution costs.

The New York Times is a special large metropolitan daily. It is a paper local to New York, but the high quality of its reporting and commentary, the reach and depth of both its national and international news, and the solid reputations of its features (such as the weekly *Times Magazine* and the *Book Review*) make it the nation's newspaper of record. Its print circulation hovers around 830,000 a day, and its 6 million digital subscribers bring that number to more than seven million daily readers (**Lee, 2020**).

Suburban and Small-Town Dailies

As the United States has become a nation of suburb dwellers, so too has the newspaper been suburbanized. Starting in the 1980s, the number of suburban dailies greatly increased. Despite a stall in that growth because of the circulation and revenue woes plaguing the industry as a whole, one suburban daily, Long Island's *Newsday*, is the eighth-largest paper in the country, with a combined print and digital circulation of nearly 700,000.

Small-town dailies, other than their size, are similar to their suburban cousins if there is a nearby large metropolitan paper; for example, the small-town daily *Eagle-Tribune* publishes in the shadow of Boston's two big dailies. Its focus is the Merrimack River Valley region in Massachusetts and southern New Hampshire, 25 miles northwest of Boston, serving as the heart of that geographic community.

Weeklies and Semiweeklies

Many weeklies and semiweeklies have prospered because advertisers have followed them to the suburbs. Community reporting makes them valuable to those people who identify more with their immediate environment than they do with the neighboring big city. Suburban advertisers like the narrowly focused readership and more manageable advertising rates. Readers looking for national and international news have countless online sources for that information, but those looking for local and regional news as well as the "holy trinity" of local information—high school sports, obituaries, and the police blotter—do not. This thirst for local news and information has given birth to scores of **hyperlocal free weeklies**, most often online but frequently digital *and* print, across the country. They serve discrete neighborhoods, such as the *Queens Courier* and other Schneps Media outlets dedicated to New York's individual five boroughs, Long Island, and Westchester County (**Blinder, 2020**).



▼ High school sports, part of the “holy trinity” of local news buoying community papers’ bottom lines.

Susan Baran

The Ethnic Press

Ethnic press refers to papers published for specific audiences based on their nationality, religion, or language. One hundred and thirty American cities are served by at least one Spanish-language publication. This number has remained constant for some time as publications backed by English-language papers, such as the *Dallas Morning News’s Al Día* and the *Miami Herald’s El Nuevo Herald*, join more traditional weekly and semi-weekly independent Spanish-language papers, such as the nation’s several *La Voz Hispana* papers. This stability is a result of three factors. First, the big dailies have realized, as have all media, that to be successful (and, in this case, to reverse ongoing declines in circulation), they must reach an increasingly fragmented audience. Second, at 18% of the population, self-described Hispanic or Latino people represent not only a sizable fragment of the overall audience but also America’s fastest-growing minority group. Third, because the newspaper is the most local of the mass media and nonnative English speakers tend to identify closely with their immediate locales, Spanish-language papers—like most foreign-language newspapers—command a loyal readership, one attractive to advertisers who have relatively few other ways to reach this lucrative group of consumers holding $1.5 trillion in purchasing power (**Vann, 2020**).



America's foreign-language readers are served by a robust ethnic press.

Susan Baran

African American papers, as they have for a century and a half, remain a vibrant part of this country's **ethnic press**. African Americans represent about 13% of the total population, but because English is their native language, African Americans typically read mainstream newspapers. In fact, after whites, they represent the second-largest group of newspaper readers in the country. Still, 200 dailies, weeklies, and semiweeklies aim specifically at African Americans, and papers such as the *Amsterdam News* in New York, the *Los Angeles Sentinel*, and the *Minnesota Spokesman-Recorder*, the second-oldest minority publication in America, specialize in urban-based journalism unlike that found in the traditional mainstream dailies.

A robust ethnic press exists beyond Spanish-language and African American newspapers. For example, New York City is home to foreign-language newspapers serving nationalities speaking 50 different languages—in the *B*s alone there are Bangladeshi, Bosnian, Brazilian, Bulgarian, and Byelorussian. The *I*s have Indian, Iranian, Irish, Israeli, and Italian. In addition, the United States is home to more than 200 other foreign-language papers.

The Alternative Press

Another type of newspaper, most commonly a weekly and available at no cost, is the **alternative press**. The offspring of the underground press of the 1960s antiwar, antiracism, pro-drug culture, these papers have redefined themselves. The most successful among them—the *Chicago Reader*, the *Washington City Paper*, the *Miami New Times*, and the *Seattle Weekly*— succeed by attracting upwardly mobile young people and young professionals, not the disaffected counterculture readers who were their original audiences.

Their strategy of downplaying politics and emphasizing events listings, local arts advertising, and eccentric personal classified ads has permitted the country's 100 alternative weeklies to attract 25 million hard-copy and online readers a week. However, this figure masks the fact that the number of

hard-copy readers is in decline because content once considered “alternative,” and therefore, not suited for traditional newspapers, is quite at home on the Web. In response, most alternative papers have a Web presence, and there are now Web-only alternative “papers,” which led the industry trade group, the Association of Alternative Newsweeklies, to change its name to the Association of Alternative Newsmedia.



▼ A pioneer in serving a fragmented audience, *The Village Voice* went online-only in 2017 and shut down completely in 2018. But America’s first alternative weekly returned online and in quarterly print in 2021.

Courtesy of The Village Voice

The Newspaper as an Advertising Medium

The reason we have the number and variety of newspapers we do is that readers value them. When newspapers prosper financially, it is because advertisers recognize their worth as an ad medium. Nonetheless, the difficult truth for newspapers is that advertising revenues have fallen 62% between 2008 and 2018, to $14.3 billion (**Adgate, 2020**). Still, ad income, long the majority contributor to papers' bottom line, now makes up only about half of newspapers' overall revenue. Still, over $14 billion in annual ad sales suggests that advertisers find newspapers' readers an attractive audience. Why?



▲ Newspapers remain a powerful advertising platform because they are the most local mass medium and they continue to attract millions of print and online readers.

Gawrav Sinha/Getty Images

- The medium's reach. Two-thirds of all Americans read a print or online paper every month, and four out of 10 read one every day, or the equivalent of a daily Super Bowl broadcast.
- Newspapers are local. Supermarkets, car dealers, department stores, movie theaters, and other local merchants who want to announce a sale or offer a coupon automatically turn to the local paper. Eighty-two percent of American households make regular use of printed newspaper circulars (**Mansi Media, 2019**).
- Newspaper readers, regardless of the platform on which they read, are attractive to advertisers: their incomes, homeownership rates, education levels, and employment rates are above the national average.

The News and Feature Services

Much of the 35% of the newspaper that is not advertising space is filled with content provided not by the paper's own journalists, but by those working for independent news and feature services. News services, as we've already seen, collect news and distribute it to their subscribers. (They are no longer called "wire" services because they no longer use telephone wires. Today material is more likely to come by computer network or satellite.) Unlike the early days of the wire services, today's subscriber is three times more likely to be a broadcast outlet than a newspaper. These radio and television stations receive voice and video, as well as written copy. There are hundreds of news agencies. Agence France-Presse (AFP), the Associated Press (AP), and Reuters are well-known global operations, and there are nation-specific agencies, such as the Polish Press Agency, and topic-specific operations as well, for example the Catholic News Agency. Depending on the provider, subscribers receive a choice of material, for example, national and international news, state and regional news, sports, business news, farm and weather reports, and human interest and consumer material.

The feature services, called **feature syndicates**, do not gather and distribute news. Instead, they provide the work of columnists, essayists, cartoonists, and other creative individuals to their client publications. Among that material are opinion pieces, such as commentaries by Eugene Robinson or Dave Barry; horoscope, chess, and bridge columns; editorial cartoons, such as the work of Jim Morin and Mike Luckovich; and comics, the most common and popular form of syndicated material. Among the major syndicates, the best known are *The New York Times* Syndicate, King Features Syndicate, Newspaper Enterprise Association (NEA), *The Washington Post* News Service and Syndicate, and United Feature Syndicate.

Trends and Convergence in Newspaper Publishing

Loss of competition within the industry, hypercommercialism, convergence, and the evolution of newspaper readership are altering not only the nature of the medium but also its relationship with its audiences.

Loss of Competition

The newspaper industry has seen a dramatic decline in competition. This has taken two forms: loss of competing papers and concentration of ownership. In 1923, 502 American cities had two or more competing (having different ownership) dailies. Today, fewer than 12 cities have separate competing papers. With print circulation and advertising revenues continuing to fall for urban dailies, very few cities can support more than one paper, raising the issue of lack of editorial diversity. Cities with only one newspaper have only one newspaper editorial voice. This runs counter to two long-held American beliefs about the relationship between a free press and its readers:

- Truth flows from a multitude of tongues.
- The people are best served by a number of antagonistic voices.

These are the same values that fuel worry over concentration as well. What becomes of political, cultural, and social debate when there are neither multiple nor antagonistic (or at least different) voices? Media critic Robert **McChesney (1997)** offered this answer: "As ownership concentrated nationally in the form of chains, journalism came to reflect the partisan interests of owners and advertisers, rather than the diverse interests of any given community" (p. 13). Today, ownership of the nation's daily newspapers is concentrated among only 10 companies, controlling half (**Abernathy, 2020**). The 2020 merger of the country's two largest chains, Gannett and GateHouse Media, created a conglomerate, retaining the Gannett name, owning 613 daily, weekly, and community papers (**Waldman, 2020**).

Chains are not new. Hearst owned several big-city papers in the 1880s, but at that time most cities enjoyed significant competition between papers. Now that most communities have only one paper, nonlocal chain or conglomerate control of that voice is more problematic. Additional concern is raised about chain ownership when the chain is also a media conglomerate, owning several different types of media outlets, as well as other nonmedia companies. Will the different media holdings speak with one corporate voice? Will they speak objectively, and will they cover at all the doings of their nonmedia corporations?

Chains do have their supporters. Although some critics see big companies as more committed to profit and shareholder dividends, others see chains such as McClatchy, winner of numerous Pulitzer Prizes and other awards, as turning expanded economic and journalistic resources toward better service and journalism. (This legacy may be in jeopardy, as the chain declared bankruptcy in 2020 and operation of its papers taken over by hedge fund Chatham Asset Management; **Robertson & Tracy, 2020**.) Some critics see outside ownership as uncommitted to local communities and issues, but others see balance and objectivity (especially important in one-paper towns). Ultimately, we must recognize that not all

chains operate alike. Some run their holdings as little more than profit centers; others see profit residing in exemplary service. Some groups require that all their papers toe the corporate line; others grant local autonomy.



▲ In 2019, after nearly 100 years of operation, the *Salt Lake Tribune* became one of the many papers across the country converting to non-profit ownership.

Sophia Eppolito/AP Images

Conglomeration: Hypercommercialism, Erosion of the Firewall, and Loss of Mission

As in other media, conglomeration has led to increased pressure on newspapers to turn a profit. This manifests itself in three distinct but related ways—hypercommercialism, erasure of the distinction between ads and news, and ultimately, loss of the journalistic mission itself.

Hypercommercialism takes many forms. For example, many papers, such as *USA Today*, *The New York Times*, the *Orange County Register,* and Michigan's *Oakland Press* and *Macomb Daily*, sell ad space on their front pages, once the exclusive province of news. Other papers, such as Rhode Island's *Providence Journal*, take this form of hypercommercialism halfway, affixing removable sticker ads to their front pages. Many papers now permit (and charge for) the placement of pet obituaries alongside those of deceased humans. The *Southeast Missourian* sells letters-to-the-editor placement to those who want to support political candidates.

A second problematic outcome of conglomeration, say critics, is that the quest for profits at all costs is eroding the *firewall*, the once inviolate barrier between newspapers' editorial and advertising missions. Although critics find the position of "advertorial editor" at the *Fairbanks Daily News-Miner*—whose salary is split equally between the newsroom and advertising department—strikingly inappropriate, most papers of all sizes face the same problem. "We're all salespeople now," said Mike Wilson, editor of the *Dallas Morning News* (in **Parker, 2015**).

Media industry reporter Greg **Dool (2019)** explains the shift from journalism toward sales, "Today's business climate requires editors to work side-by-side with ad sales teams (and their clients) in order to meet new and evolving demands from marketers and offset declines in traditional advertising." One particularly dramatic example of offsetting ad revenue declines is **sponsored content**, content paid for by an advertiser that adopts the appearance of traditional editorial material.

There are many names for the practice, including branded content, native advertising, brand journalism, and content marketing, but whatever the label, the strategy of permitting advertisers to pay for or even create articles that look like traditional editorial content is common as newspapers try to find new sources of income. Sometimes the material is written by the paper's journalists; other times it is provided by the sponsor or its advertising agency. In either case, the story typically looks in tone and design like content usually found on the paper's site or in its pages. All papers of size now engage in the practice. *The Wall Street Journal*, for example, maintains in-house teams to create sponsored content, the Custom Studios, staffed with experienced editors, journalists, and designers. *The New York Times* has a 100-person Brand Studio in its ad department; and the *Guardian* boasts a 62-person content studio, dubbed Labs. Sponsored content, while now common in all ad-supported media, remains controversial, as you'll read in **Chapter 5**. But for now, the question remains, "How can advertising intentionally designed to look like a newspaper's editorial content serve any purpose other than to diminish people's faith in its real journalism?"

Newspapers will die, say conglomeration's critics, because they will have abandoned their traditional democratic mission, a failure all the more tragic because despite falling circulation, more newspapers might have remained financially healthy had they invested rather than cut when times were good. In the era of record revenues and record profits, papers were laying off staff, closing state and regional bureaus, hiring younger and less experienced reporters, and shrinking their **newsholes**—the amount of space given to news. Newspaper owners were so focused on profit margins that the editors who worked for them were distracted from finding and running great stories, a problem magnified by the entry of hedge funds, big-money investment companies seeking maximum short-term profits for their investors, into the newspaper business. These hedge funds now own seven of the 10 largest newspaper chains and 55% of the country's daily newspaper circulation (**Waldman, 2020**). Some buy struggling papers, strengthen them, and sell them for a profit.

However, *vulture funds*, another kind of hedge fund, buy troubled papers, cut their staffs to the bone to maximize short-term profit, and sell off the remaining pieces of the business (for example, printing presses, delivery trucks, and buildings) when profits start to wane because of reduced news coverage. For example, After Alden Global Capitol acquired the *Monterey Herald*, wrote one of its reporters, Julie Reynolds, "Layoffs and attrition accelerated at breakneck speed. Instead of a story a day, reporters scrambled to crank out two or three because there were fewer and fewer of us. The office supplies vanished, and we had to buy our own pens, calendars, and manila folders. Then the hot water in the bathrooms was turned off. The gutters were never repaired, and staff creatively arranged house

plants to try to soak up the leaks." Newspaper analyst Ken Doctor was not surprised: "The impact is obvious. . .It's the bankers who are deciding what will be defined as news, and who and how many people will be employed to report it" (both in **Pompeo, 2020**).

Are there alternatives to chain and hedge and vulture fund ownership of papers? One is converting to nonprofit status. The *Philadelphia Inquirer*, for example, is owned by the Philadelphia Foundation. The *Salt Lake City Tribune* and the *Tampa Bay Times* have followed a similar path, and the 14 New Jersey weeklies once owned by the New Jersey Hills Media Group now operate as nonprofit newspapers under the auspices of the Corporation for New Jersey Local Media. Another option, although somewhat controversial given concerns over undue owner influence, is billionaire ownership as exists with the *Washington Post* (Jeff Bezos), *Boston Globe* (John Henry), and the *Los Angeles Times* (Patrick Soon-Shiong). Some papers, for example, the *Dallas Morning News*, are experimenting with memberships, in this case granting special benefits to "premium subscribers." You can read about another means of maintaining quality journalism in the box entitled "Nonprofit Newsrooms Fill the Void in Journalism."

Convergence with the Internet

Why so much talk about money? You and the new digital technologies are why. You are increasingly moving your media consumption online. The Internet has devastated newspapers' advertising income. For example, as much as 39% of all Google search results come from news publishers' original content, earning the company $5 billion a year from others' journalism. Along with Facebook, the two digital giants alone take in 60% of all online advertising dollars in the US, often using news outlets' work to drive those dollars away from those very same news outlets (**Blethen, 2020**; **Ridings, 2020**). In recognition of the damage it is inflicting on journalism, however, Google announced in mid-2020 that it would begin paying "high quality" news sites for their work (**Bender, 2020**).

The Internet has also proven extremely financially damaging in its attack on newspapers' classified advertising business. Before the Internet, classified advertising was the exclusive domain of local newspapers.

Today, the Internet overwhelms newspapers' one-time dominance through commercial online classified advertising sites (for example, eBay, Cars.com, and Zillow), advertisers connecting directly with customers on their own sites, and communitarian-minded (that is, free community-based) sites. Craigslist, for example, originating in San Francisco in 1995, is now in more than 700 cities across 70 different countries. Very quickly the site became a force, costing local papers more than $5 billion in classified ad revenue from 2000 to 2007 alone (**Seamans & Zhu, 2013**).

Advertising losses are most striking in employment and auto sales classifieds. To counter career sites like Monster.com, about one-third of the newspapers across the country created their own national service, CareerBuilder, which rivals Monster's number of listings but not income. Dozens more work with competitor-turned-partner Monster.com. To counter online auto sales classified sites, as well as real estate and general merchandise sites, virtually every newspaper in the country now maintains its own online classified pages. These efforts, however, have done little to save newspapers' one-time classified dominance.

The problem of the loss of classified ad income is magnified by the exodus of young people, that highly desirable demographic, from print to electronic news sources. Only 6% of the country's 18 to 29 year olds read the hard-copy paper daily, favoring every other platform, even podcasts, for their daily news consumption (Watson, 2020). In the late 1970s, 33% of 10th graders read a newspaper almost every day; today the number is 2% (**"Teens Today," 2018**).

Not only does the Internet provide readers with more information and more depth, and with greater speed, than the traditional newspaper, but they empower readers to control and interact with the news, in essence becoming their own editors in chief. As a result, the traditional newspaper is reinventing itself by converging with these very same technologies. And 2016 seems to have been a watershed year in papers' convergence with the Internet as, among other things, the number of people employed in digital publishing exceeded the number working at newspapers for the first time in history (**Sass, 2016**); the Newspaper Association of America dropped "paper" from its name, becoming the News Media Alliance, and began accepting digital-only news sites as members (**Edmonds, 2016**); the American Society of News Editors announced that it would estimate a newspaper's size not by circulation but by monthly Internet traffic when setting membership dues (**Mullin, 2016b**); and Facebook began offering free online training for journalists (**Albeanu, 2016**).

Still, the marriage of newspapers to the Internet has not yet proved financially successful for the older medium. And in this there resides a damaging irony for the newspaper industry. "The amount of time Americans spend with journalists' work and their willingness to pay for it have both spiked, higher than at any point since Election 2016, maybe before," wrote journalism analyst Ken Doctor in 2020 at a time of medical, racial, and political turmoil in America. "But the business that has supported these journalists— shakily, on wobbly wheels—now finds the near future almost impossible to navigate. . .The increases in reader revenue are outmatched by the declines in advertising." The problem, in other words, is replacing *analog dollars* with *digital dimes.* That is, despite heavy traffic on newspaper websites—eight in 10 adults who go online will visit a newspaper website—online readers simply are not worth as much as print readers. Still, there are encouraging signs.



USING MEDIA TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Nonprofit Newsrooms Fill the Void in Journalism

As newspapers close shop, journalism suffers. "You know who loves this new day of the lack of journalism? Politicians. Businessmen. Nobody's watching them anymore," warns Russ Kendall, a veteran newspaper journalist now self-employed as a pizza maker. "I have a deep fear about what is happening to journalism. No one else is going to do what we do," added another former longtime journalist forced into retirement (**Maharidge, 2016**, pp. 22–23).

What is it that journalists do that no one else will? They do time-consuming and labor-intensive reporting. They go out and talk to people. They constantly dig for sources and leads; they read documents; they search for facts and information; they ferret out and tell the untold stories. They know the beats they cover; they strive for objectivity, and

they have editors who check their facts and guard against unwarranted assumptions and conscious or unconscious bias. Journalists are the people's eyes, ears, and voices. And their numbers are dwindling, as you read in this chapter's opening vignette.

In that conversation between two friends, we saw one solution to the problem of the disappearing of journalism, Report for America, which trains, places, and subsidizes the salaries of journalists. There is another approach that is making a difference: nonprofit news-rooms staffed by veteran and newly minted professional journalists alike. Some are funded by foundations. Between 2009 and 2016, foundations gave $1.1 billion to American journalism projects (**Nelson & Ferrucci, 2020**), and in 2019, the Knight Foundation alone committed $300 million over 5 years to "build the future of local news" (**Posner, 2020**). Some receive voluntary payments from their for-profit media partners. For example, nonprofit ProPublica and the *New York Daily News* combined on an investigative series on noise abatement in New York City, and commercial TV station WGRZ in Buffalo funds the local nonprofit *Investigative Post* to produce five stories a month.

And while some nonprofit news-rooms are small and serve local communities and local media, many maintain partnerships with major national media. *The New York Times* uses the work of nonprofit newsrooms in Chicago, San Francisco, and other locations to strengthen its reporting in those locales. In addition to the *Times*, major media outlets, such as *60 Minutes*, National Public Radio, *Salon*, *USA Today*, NBC-owned television stations, the *Los Angeles Times*, *Bloomberg Businessweek*, and *The Washington Post,* make regular use of several nonprofits' investigative reporting on controversial and expensive investigations into issues such as natural gas drilling, abuse of federal money, and the failure of many of the nation's coroner and medical examiner offices.

Have nonprofit newsrooms made a difference? "We see a lot of legacy publications doing the formulaic press conference stuff—whereas the [nonprofit] publishers have never felt an obligation to do everything, because they couldn't," answers Matt DeRienzo, executive director of Local Independent Online News Publishers. "What they are doing, in many cases, is more enterprising, more investigative stuff. They step off the hamster wheel and get to what's really at the heart of community. . . . We never want to be the sixth person at a press conference, and we never will be" (in **Mullin, 2016a**).

ProPublica offers an example of this "more enterprising, more investigative stuff." The foundation-supported nonprofit uses **engagement reporting**, calling on citizens using online call-outs, flyers in community centers, and even announcements in traditional media to solicit tips, find sources, and identify under-reported stories, typically those ad-supported news outlets often ignore. Its reporting has uncovered "hot" topics like age discrimination at IBM, hospitals abusing life-support systems, and incompetence in the manufacture of coronavirus testing tubes problems (**Scire, 2020**).

If you're interested in a nonprofit journalism outfit in your area or one covering an issue of particular significance to you, the Institute for Nonprofit News maintains a list of more than 285 nonprofit newsrooms at https:// inn.org/members/.

There are tens of thousands of online newspapers for every state in the union and most foreign countries. These papers have adopted a variety of strategies to become "relevant on the Internet." The *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, for example, offers subscribers free iPads (and personal training sessions). *The Washington Post* joined with *Newsweek* magazine, cable television channel MSNBC, and television network NBC to share content among all the parties' websites and to encourage users to link to their respective sites. Others (for example, *The Boston Globe*, the *Miami Herald*, and *The Kansas City Star*) have adopted just the opposite approach, focusing on their strength as local media by offering websites specific to their newspapers. Each offers not only what readers might expect to find in these sites' parent newspapers but also significant additional information on how to make the most of the cities they represent. These sites are as much city guides as they are local newspapers.

The local element offers several advantages. Local searchable and archival classified ads offer greater efficiency than do the big national classified ad websites such as Monster.com and Cars.com. No other medium can offer news on crime, housing, neighborhood politics, zoning, school lunch menus, marriage licenses, and bankruptcies—all searchable by street or zip code. Local newspapers can use their websites to develop their own linked secondary sites, thus providing impressive detail on local industry. For example, the *San Jose Mercury News*'s SiliconValley.com focuses on the digital industries. Several McClatchy papers offer SportsPass, a subscription service offering unlimited access to their sports reporting. Another localizing strategy is for online newspapers to build and maintain message boards and chat groups on their sites that deal with important issues. One more bow to the power of the Web—and users' demands for interactivity—is that most newspapers have begun their own blog sites, inviting readers and journalists to talk to one another.

Despite all this innovation and the readership it generates, papers still face two lingering questions about their online success. The first, as we've seen, is how they will earn more income from their Web operations. Internet users have come to expect free content, and for years newspapers were happy to provide their product at no cost, simply to establish their presence online. Unfortunately, they now find that people are unwilling to pay for what the papers themselves have been giving away for free online. So, newspapers have to fix their business models.

Among those "fixes" are newspapers that rely on advertising for their online revenue. Many continue to provide free access, hoping to attract more readers and, therefore, more advertising revenue. Some newspapers even offer free online classifieds to draw people to their sites (and to their paid advertisers). The vast majority of newspapers, recognizing that the Internet surpassed print papers as readers' source of news in 2009 (**Mindlin, 2009**), offer online subscriptions, averaging about $10 a month (although industry research suggests that $3.99 a week is the optimal subscription price; **Williams, 2019**).

Most are also experimenting with variations of a **paywall**, that is, making all or some of their content available only to those visitors willing to pay. Some have strict paywalls: readers gain access only by paying for it. *The Wall Street Journal* and *The Newport Daily News* employ this method. Others, *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, for example, offer a *metered system,* sometimes called a leaky paywall—print subscribers get all online content for free, but nonsubscribers are limited to a specified number of free stories before they have to pay. Paywalls, however, are flexible.

Many papers, big and small, dropped paywalls on their 2020 coronavirus reporting, giving access to all who were interested (**McBride & Edmonds, 2020**). **Micropayments**, small individual payments (for

example, 19 or 25 cents) per story provided by an aggregator such as Blendle, have been successful in Europe and have had limited success in the United States (**Thorpe, 2020**).



▼ *Boston.com* represents one paper's online strategy. The *Boston Globe* uses its site to focus on more local news and sports.

NetPhotos3/Alamy Stock Photo

This digital readership raises the second question faced by online newspapers: How will circulation be measured? In fact, if visitors to a newspaper's website are added to its hard-copy readership, newspapers are more popular than ever; that is, they are drawing readers in larger numbers than ever before. Therefore, if many online papers continue to rely on a free-to-the-user, ad-supported model to boost their "circulation," how do they quantify that readership for advertisers, both print and online?

Industry insiders have called for a new metric to more accurately describe a paper's true reach, especially as ad rates are determined by how many **impressions**—the number of times an online ad is seen—an individual article can generate. "Circulation," they say, should be replaced by **integrated audience reach**, the total number of readers of the print edition plus those unduplicated Web readers who access the paper only online or via a mobile device. This is not insignificant given the heavy traffic enjoyed by newspaper websites. For example, the *Washington Post* has a million unique monthly visitors and the *New York Times* reaches more than 90 million and has 3.4 million digital-news-only subscribers (Benton, 2020). But there is the danger that new metrics might encourage newspapers to chase **click bait**, articles with catchy headlines designed to gain impressions rather than make an impression. You can learn more about this potential problem in the box titled "Attracting Readers with Click Bait."

Smartphones, Tablets, and e-Readers

One in five American adults owns an e-reader (**Haines, 2020**); 53% own a tablet and 85% have a smartphone (**Edison Research, 2020**). Data such as these have added to the newspaper industry's optimism about its digital future, especially because more than eight in 10 US adults get at least some of their news online (**Shearer, 2021**). Moreover, Facebook is "a regular source of news" for 36% of

Americans and Twitter serves the same role for another 15% (**Shearer & Mitchell, 2021**). Social media as sources of news are of great interest to newspapers because they are especially attractive to young readers who seem to have abandoned print, as you'll soon read. Additional good news resides in the fact that fully 20% of American adults not only already pay for an online news subscription, one-third have multiple subscriptions, and 88% say they will continue to pay for online news (**Fletcher, 2020**). You can see their motivations in **Figure 4.2**.



Figure 4.2 Reasons Americans Pay for Online News Subscriptions.

Source: ***Fletcher, 2020****.*
(photo) Maskot/Getty Images

Access to newspapers on tablets and smartphones has been further encouraged by apps and digital services designed specifically to link mobile readers with the news. With Apple News, for example, readers can select topics and publications and have stories instantly delivered without having to move from app to app. Facebook News uses live journalists and algorithms to personalize story selection. Scroll is a monthly subscription service that collates a selection of stories from a wide variety of news outlets and delivers them, without ads, to people's digital devices. And subscription news site aggregator Scroll joined existing digital news delivery options, such as Blendle, an app that sells individual articles aggregated from a variety of news sources.

CULTURAL FORUM

Attracting Readers with Click Bait

Newspaper readers are moving to the Web, but the industry is still struggling to find a way to better monetize that digital migration to make up for the massive loss of print advertising revenue. A question now in the cultural forum is how far should newspapers go to bring even more readers, especially demographically prized young adults, to their sites? With hard-copy newspapers, the solution to the problem of attracting readers was easy: In addition to news, offer sports, entertainment news, weather, comics, horoscopes, and lifestyle reporting—something for everyone. Readers who came for one or more of those features (a) bought the paper and saw the ads (good for business) and (b) might come across some hard news and opinions of interest as they flipped through the pages in search of their desired content (good for developing an informed public). This model worked well for nearly two centuries. It didn't matter why people bought the paper; even if they bought it only for the sports section, they still bought the whole package. And that's how advertising rates were set— how many people bought the whole package.

But the Internet is different. People link directly to the stories that interest them. They can access *only* the results of last night's game, *only* the news of the layoffs at the fire department, or *only* accounts of the state representative's conflict of business interests. With the Internet, ad rates are determined by how many impressions specific articles can generate, so reporters researching and writing engaging stories to attract more readership to their work, whatever the topic, should be good news for journalism. But critics inside and outside the industry complain that isn't what's happening. Because an impression brings in anywhere from a fraction-of-a-cent to a few pennies, a journalist has to amass a lot of them and therefore may be incentivized to write more sensational stories.

Because of real-time analytics, newspapers now know more about their readers than ever before, allowing them to track how many people read each article, how long they stay on a page, and how they found the story. Knowing what gets read and what doesn't has produced a major transformation in newspaper journalism. Journalist Danielle **Ryan (2017)** is critical of that transformation: "Quantity and speed [become] vastly superior in importance to quality and factual accuracy. . . . The quality journalism that does appear in the midst of it all is fumbling to grab our attention through a mountain of far more appealing trash: listicles, quizzes, stenography masquerading as reporting, opinion masquerading as 'explainer' pieces, propaganda, conspiracy, fake news and cute cat videos." Headlines like "An Orphaned Boy Moved into His Grandparents' Home. The Homeowners Association Wants to Kick Him Out" and "Officials Said He Died in a Fall. Then His Wife Admitted to Poisoning His Water with Eye Drops" (both from **Nolan, 2020**) sit side-by-side with accounts of Supreme Court decisions and coronavirus death counts, potentially granting them equal importance.

"To be clear, there is nothing wrong with this," argues *Columbia Journalism Review* public editor Hamilton **Nolan (2020)**. "Every for-profit news operation must, to some extent, subsidize important work with fluff, because fluff tends to attract readers much more reliably than important work." Not only does that pay the bills, he contends, but "the serious stuff gains at least the possibility of ambient readership from the clickbait traffic."

Enter Your Voice

The newspaper—and the news—have always lived a dual life, simultaneously a commodity *and* a public good.

- Knowing that the vast majority of this country's professionally reported serious news comes from newspapers, does the reliance on Web metrics and the rush toward judging the value of news reports based on the quantity of clicks trouble you?
- Will it mean more quickly written and less-researched news and more lists of best places to eat, feel-good stories, and articles with more conjecture than facts?
- Is this a fair (and necessary) price to pay to ensure that newspapers survive? Or because there's nothing that says articles that attract clicks must be shallow, might it even be a benefit to newspapers, as they can better understand their readers and give them news that *they* value?

A Changing Readership

As has always been the case, newspapers must adapt to the ever-evolving culture of the "next" generation. It just so happens today's "next" generation are digital natives, born and raised in a digitized world. This digital revolution has changed the way we engage with content in unprecedented ways, especially the way young people engage with content. Look at **Figure 4.3**. Note how poorly print readership fares with younger news consumers. But how far should papers go to attract and keep younger readers, even if it is to their digital rather than the printed version of the paper?

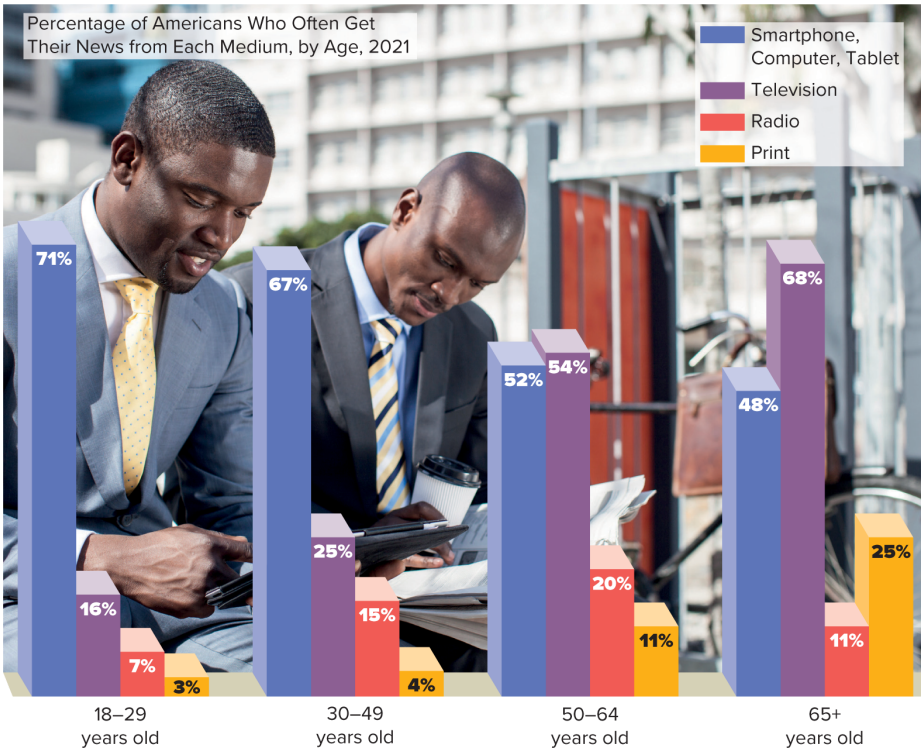


Figure 4.3 Percentage of Americans Who Often Get Their News from Each Medium, by Age.

Source: ***Roper, 2021****. (photo): AfricaImages/Getty Images*

What happens to journalistic integrity, what happens to the traditional role of newspapers in our democracy when front pages are forced to compete with an endless stream of social media gossip? What happens to depth, detail, and precision as stories get shorter and snappier to engage young readers whose attention is pulled in 15 different directions at once in any given moment? What happens to depth, detail, and precision as stories get shorter and snappier? And this is happening, as many major news organizations now require that their reporters keep their stories between 300 and 500 words, allowing only 700 words for the top two stories they're covering (**Farhi, 2014**), and that's when they aren't writing click bait.

What kind of culture develops on a diet of **soft news** (sensational stories that do not serve the democratic function of journalism) rather than **hard news** (stories that help citizens make intelligent decisions and keep up with important issues of the day)? Molly Ivins offered a pessimistic answer. The late columnist suggested that newspapers aren't dying; they're committing suicide. "This is the most remarkable business plan," she told *Editor & Publisher.*



▲ Young readers have abandoned print, but their consumption of news has simply moved online.

Peathegee Inc LLC/Blend Images

"Newspaper owners look at one another and say, 'Our rate of return is slipping a bit; let's solve the problem by making our product smaller and less helpful and less interesting'" (in **Timberg, 2015**, p. 177).

The "softening" of newspapers raises a potential media literacy issue. The media-literate person has an obligation to be aware of the impact newspapers have on individuals and society and to understand how the text of newspapers offers insight into contemporary culture. We might ask ourselves, Are we getting what we asked for? What do we as a people and as individuals want from our newspaper? Do we understand the role newspapers play in our democratic process? Are we fully aware of how newspapers help shape our understanding of ourselves and our world?

In a 1787 letter, Thomas Jefferson wrote to a colleague, “Were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers or newspapers without government, I should not hesitate to prefer the latter.” Would he write that about today’s newspaper, a newspaper increasingly designed to meet the wants, needs, and interests of younger, occasional newspaper readers or those who do not read at all?

There is another view, however—that there is no problem here at all. Ever since the days of the penny press, newspapers have been dominated by soft news. All we are seeing today is an extension of what has always been. Moreover, nonreaders are simply going elsewhere for the hard news and information that were once the sole province of newspapers. They’re going online, to television, and to specifically targeted sources, including magazines and newsletters.

DEVELOPING MEDIA LITERACY SKILLS

Interpreting Relative Placement of Stories

Newspapers tell readers what is significant and meaningful through their placement of stories in and on their pages. Within a paper’s sections (for example, front, leisure, sports, and business), readers almost invariably read pages in order (that is, page 1, then page 2, and so on). Recognizing this, papers place the stories they think are most important on the earliest pages. Newspaper jargon for this phenomenon has even entered our everyday language: “front-page news” means the same thing in the living room as in the pressroom.

The placement of stories on a page is also important (see **Figure 4.4**). English readers read from top to bottom and from left to right. Stories that the newspaper staff deems important tend to be placed above the fold and toward the left of the page. This is an important aspect of the power of newspapers to influence public opinion and of media literacy. Relative story placement is a factor in **agenda setting**—the way newspapers and other media influence not only what we think but also what we think about.



▼ **Figure 4.4** Placement of Stories on a Typical Front Page.

spxChrome/Getty Images

A media-literate newspaper reader should be able to make judgments about other layout decisions. The use of photos suggests the importance the editors assign to a story, as do the size and wording of headlines, the employment of *jumps* (continuations to other pages), and placement of a story in a given section. A report of a person's death on the front page, as opposed to the international section or in the obituaries, carries a different meaning, as does an analysis of an issue placed on the front page as opposed to the editorial page.

Moreover, this "grammar" holds for online newspapers as well, especially when, like the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* and the *Tampa Bay Times*, they offer a replica of the paper, an **e-replica edition**. Most newspapers, however, provide a digital "close version" of their front page that is not an exact replica but still maintains the traditional values of left-to-right and above-and-below-the-fold.

And as you might imagine, others, the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* and *Providence Journal* for example, take advantage of the Web's ease of navigation and present a "front page"

that offers a wide array of headlines and images that link to stories throughout the edition, freeing readers to make their own determination of what is newsworthy.



MEDIA LITERACY CHALLENGE

Reading the Newspaper: Hard Copy vs. Online vs. Mobile

Two elements of media literacy are *critical thinking skills enabling the development of independent judgments about media content* and *strategies for analyzing and discussing media messages*. Both are involved in this challenge.

Find the online version of a newspaper with which you are familiar, its app-enabled version for your smartphone or tablet, and its dead-tree version, all from the same day. Compare the three. What content is common to all three? What content exists online or on mobile technology that is unavailable in the printed newspaper?

How would you characterize the online-specific content? The mobile-specific content? That is, are there specific types of content that seem to appear online and on mobile devices as opposed to appearing in the hard-copy version? Can you speculate why this might be?

How similar or different are the advertisers in the two electronic versions from those in the printed version? Do the online and mobile versions have different advertisers? Can you speculate why the similarities and differences you found exist? Describe your experience reading the online and mobile newspapers. What did you like about it? What did you dislike? Do the same for the printed version. Despite the demographic trends that might suggest otherwise, do you think you could ever become a regular reader of the hard-copy newspaper? Why or why not?

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Cultural Forum Blue Column icon, Media Literacy Red Torch Icon, Using Media Green Gear icon, Developing Media book in starburst icon: ©McGraw Hill

Introduction to Chapter 5

About This Chapter

Magazines are perhaps the most underrated of the various mass mediums, both in terms of their historical importance and in terms of their ongoing influence. Magazines led the way in establishing a truly national media presence in the United States. It's hard to imagine today that there was once a long period of American history where Americans' knowledge of current events was restricted to what their local newspapers reported. It wasn't until the completion of the first transcontinental railroad and the national spread of magazines that Americans across the country shared a relatively common set of stories and reports. Magazines brought a common culture to a nation whose people were separated by vast distances—a nation still recovering from a shattering civil war. Later, magazines popularized investigative journalism, leading to many of the protections Americans still enjoy. In the modern era, magazines reacted a fragmenting national audience by pioneering niche marketing techniques later used by cable television and the Internet. Magazines have both reflected the social and economic realities of our changing nation and influenced the nature of those changes.

WHAT TO FOCUS ON

Focus on the information in this introduction, particularly the importance of the transcontinental railroad and the rise of the muckrakers. As always, the history of this mass medium is important—not just how and where magazines began, but how the industry developed over time in the United States. It's important for you to know the reasons for the various periods of growth in the magazine industry, as well as understanding the timing and scope of that growth. In other words, you should not just know how many magazines were being published during a certain period, you should also know why that number was changing. Focus on why the nature and audience of magazines changed after World War II, and how that affected what kinds of magazines got published and how they were marketed. Know what the audience for magazines is today, including which groups are more and less likely to consume magazines. Focus less on convergence and how we measure circulation.

Introductory Information About Magazines

The Transcontinental Railroad

It is difficult to overstate the importance of the arrival of the first transcontinental railroad in the United States in 1869—not only to the history of magazines but to the history of the country. Historian Stephen E. Ambrose declared that "Next to winning the Civil War and abolishing slavery, building the first transcontinental railroad, from Omaha, Nebraska, to Sacramento, California, was the greatest achievement of the American people in the nineteenth century."[1] As Ambrose's argument suggests, however, the first transcontinental railroad was not what most people picture when they hear the term: a single, continuous line of track from one end of the country to the other.

The early history of the United States of America was dominated by the states that had started their existence as British colonies, and that legacy produced a country whose population largely resided along the Eastern seaboard. In 1870, only two of the twenty most populous states in the country were west of the Mississippi River, and 85% of the nation's total population lived east of the Mississippi.[2] As a result, the eastern states had an extensive railroad system. The fast-growing western states, however, were largely disconnected from the country's transportation infrastructure. This was particularly problematic in the case of California, which formed most of the country's west coast. Because California was the country's link to global trade through the Pacific, it was imperative to create a system that would allow goods and people to flow from coast to coast. Furthermore, a truly transcontinental railroad system would make it easier for Americans to travel to the west, encouraging a westward expansion of the population and establishing a truly national economy and culture. The transcontinental railroad, "was absolutely necessary to bind the country together."[3]

Although the railroad industry in the United States was well-established and highly profitable by 1850, the transcontinental railroad was an enormous undertaking. In 1862, President Lincoln—a long-time railroad enthusiast—signed into law the **Pacific Railway Act**. "The bill created a corporate entity called the **Union Pacific**, which would build west from the Missouri River, while the **Central Pacific** (which already existed as a corporate entity) was chartered to build east from Sacramento."[4] The Act both provided vast funds for the new rail line and set up a competitive dynamic between the Union Pacific and the Central Pacific companies. On May 10, 1869, the tracks built by the two companies met at Promontory Summit in Utah, and the railroad was complete.

In today's highly interconnected world of massive airports and a vast highway system, it is hard to imagine what the completion of the transcontinental railroad meant to the citizens of the United States. Before the railroad's completion, it might take a person months to travel from New York to San Francisco, and the trip could easily cost $1,000—around $25,000 in today's dollars. "But less than a week after the pounding of the Golden Spike, a man or woman could go from New York to San Francisco in seven days. That included stops."[5] And the price of a trip west fell to as low as $70. This was more than just an issue of convenience, though that was no small consideration. The railroad took a dangerous and unreliable excursion and turned it into an easy trip that was certain, routinized, and carefully scheduled. Within fairly short order, the transcontinental railroad and its offshoots created a "continent-wide culture in which mail and popular magazines and books that used to cost dollars per

ounce and had taken forever to get from the East to the West Coast, now cost pennies and got there in a few days."[6] Magazines in particular became a national mass medium, but without the transcontinental railroad that might not have happened.

Focus on Critical Thinking: What is a "Muckraker," Who Came Up with that Word, and Why Do We Care?

The arrival of the transcontinental railroad had a major impact on magazines, and that led to other changes both within the medium itself and America as a whole. The railroad made it possible—and comparatively inexpensive—for magazine publishers to target a much larger audience. As the upcoming chapter points out, magazines became a truly national mass medium after the civil war—and that had as much to do with the changes in railroads as anything else. The end of the 1800s saw and enormous expansion in the number of magazines, and the arrival of many new publications that were explicitly designed to reach a national audience. One commonality among many of these magazines was the presence on their staff of aggressive investigative journalists. Publishers discovered that America's increasingly successful and well-educated populace loved magazine articles that exposed corruption and corporate misdeeds, so investigative journalism became a standard feature of any news-related magazine that wanted to boost its circulation and, therefore, its advertising revenue.

The January 1903 issue of ***McClure's*** magazine is often cited as the formal beginning of the "muckraker" period of journalism.[7] The issue contained several articles on various forms of corporate and governmental disregard for the law. Perhaps the most famous of these articles was a piece by **Ida Tarbell** describing Standard Oil's history of ruthless, anti-competitive practices. Tarbell eventually became one of the most famous investigative journalists of the times. Investigative journalists of this era wrote articles exposing problems involving government, oil companies, the treatment of workers, women's issues, environmental destruction, and even food safety. One of the most famous series of articles in the history of investigative journalism was written by **Upton Sinclair**. His reporting about the disgusting conditions in Chicago's meatpacking industry was eventually collected and published as the book **The Jungle**—which is still taught in many American literature classes today. Some of the legal protections enjoyed by Americans today can be traced directly to the investigative journalism of the very early 1900s, and to the public outrage created by magazine writers.

One of the most interesting aspects of the investigative journalists of the turn of the century is the way they received their famous nickname: **muckrakers**. The term "muckraker" has survived as common parlance for certain kinds of reporting, but virtually no one talks about what that term meant when it was coined. And it turns out that the meaning of that word and the circumstances of its origin are still quite relevant to the way we regard investigative reporting today.

Theodore Roosevelt had successfully run for president as the figurehead of the progressive political movement, and his "reform efforts received a great deal of reinforcement" from investigative journalists who were exposing the extent of many of the problems Roosevelt was speaking out against.[8] Throughout most of his two terms as president, Roosevelt found himself in sync with the agenda of these influential magazine writers. However, during his second term Roosevelt began to worry that the tone of press of the federal government was too negative. A series of articles by reporter **David Graham Philips** had exposed the corrupt ties between many U.S. Senators and various corporate interests, and subsequent articles by other authors even suggested Roosevelt himself might be corrupt.

In April of 1906, Roosevelt gave a speech at a private club in which he admitted that "there is filth on the floor, and it must be scraped up with the muck rake." However, Roosevelt warned, "the man who never does anything else, who never thinks or speaks or writes, save of his feats with the muck rake, speedily becomes, not a help but one of the most potent forces for evil."[9] Roosevelt cautioned against an "epidemic of indiscriminate assault upon character" and went on to suggest repeatedly that it was as important to protect virtuous corporations from mistreatment by misguided citizens as it was to protect virtuous citizens from mistreatment by corrupt corporations.[10]

Details of the speech predictably leaked to the public, and Roosevelt's vivid comparison of investigative journalists with men who rake the muck off the floor caught on. Eventually investigative journalists began to be called muckrakers. While it is often said that reporters generally adopted the name with pride, it is important to understand why so many journalists objected to Roosevelt's terminology. When modern authors explain the term "muck," they tend to equate it with "dirt." However, the word "muck" derives from various non-English predecessors that meant "cow dung," and the understanding of the word at the turn of the century was much more in line with this meaning. Essentially, Roosevelt was accusing investigative journalists of raking through humanity's sewage, and of being so fascinated with the human waste they found that they couldn't be bothered to look at anything else. It's easy to understand why, given that, many reporters felt offended by his words. The comparison was meant to be insulting.

Furthermore, Roosevelt's speech highlights a conflict over investigative journalism that is still a source of concern—both fair and unfair. Investigative journalism is an important check on personal, corporate, and governmental misdeeds. The public deserves to know if corporations are engaging in harmful practices. We need to know if our governmental representatives are corrupt or inept. We believe in accountability for powerful individuals who are engaging in bad behavior. Investigative reporters give us information about all these issues that it is nearly impossible to get from any other source. On the other hand, investigative reporting itself can create problems. Reporters can engage in harassing behavior under the guise of investigation. There are many examples of people calling themselves "investigative reporters" who are in fact partisan political operatives bent on generating inaccurate stories that slur their opponents (see **Chapter 14**, "Fake News"). And it's not like President Roosevelt was entirely wrong. Many modern critics argue that journalism is so focused negative reporting that all it does is, as Roosevelt feared, indiscriminately assault everyone's character without bothering to see the good going on in the world.

The difficulty we encounter as media literate citizens is in navigating these competing concerns. We have a strong interest in supporting investigative journalists and defending their work. We need access to the information they uncover for us, and we know that those who want to keep the public ignorant about their bad actions will try to convince us that journalists are the enemy. After all, even Roosevelt was saying "yes, yes, it's great that we have investigative reporters, and we love them, but do they really have to investigate *us* as well?" That doesn't seem like something an innocent person would say. When a public figure criticizes journalists, it is often a good sign that the person in question has something to hide. However, we must also recognize that journalists themselves are capable of misdeeds, and that political activists increasingly use the claim that they are journalists to engage in disinformation and propaganda. We want to be informed, but we don't want to live in a world where public figures of all types live in constant fear of harassment and misleading coverage. We want accurate news, but we don't want positive stories to go uncovered. It is certainly our responsibility to

stay aware of these competing issues when we're evaluating any given example of journalism—whether in magazines or elsewhere—but it is also something worth adding to the list of concerns for the entire magazine industry.

What to Study

KEY WORDS

Pacific Railway Act

Union Pacific

Central Pacific *Mcclure's* Magazine

***Mcclure's* Magazine**

Muckrakers

The Postal Act of 1879

Collier's Magazine

Engagement and Affinity

Split runs

Circulation

Brand magazines

Magalogue

Sponsored content

IMPORTANT PEOPLE

Ida Tarbell

Upton Sinclair

Theodore Roosevelt

QUESTIONS YOU SHOULD BE ABLE TO ANSWER

- What was the importance of the first transcontinental railroad? Where did the new track begin and where did it end? When was it completed, and where? What changes did it make in terms of travel time and cost? What was its impact on magazines?
- Why did so many magazines start featuring investigative journalists?
- When did the "muckraker period" of American journalism begin? Who originated the term "muckraker" and under what circumstances? What did the term refer to and why was it considered

insulting? What general argument was the person who coined the term making about journalists at the time?

- What ongoing tension regarding investigative reporting is reflected in the story of the coining of the term "muckraker"?
- When did magazines arrive in the American colonies, and why weren't they successful? When did successful magazines arrive in the U.S., and how and why did in the magazine industry grow in the 30 years following that? Apart from the general trends impacting the printing industry as a whole, what factor helped fuel the success of early magazines?
- What happened to the magazine industry after the Civil War, and why? What role did women's magazines play during that time? What four reasons accounted for massive growth in magazines after the war? Why are magazines sometimes referred to as America's first national mass medium?
- How did magazines help unify the country? What three things about magazines helped them accomplish this unification?
- What was magazine circulation like in the U.S. in 1945? What factor primarily accounted for the change in magazines' relationship with their audiences during this time? How and why did magazines become a specialized medium after WWII, and what does that have to do with "engagement?"
- What percentage of American adults consume magazines in some form? What groups read the most magazines per month? What age groups are the heaviest consumers of magazines?
- How does the return on advertising dollars spent on magazines compare to that of other mediums? What percentage of all the dollars spent on major media advertising in the U.S. go to magazines?
- What is the top-performing magazine as measured by Total 360° in the US?
- What kinds of influence do advertisers try to have over magazine content?

NOTES

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2. "1870 Census: Volume 1. The Statistics of the Population of the United States." *United States Census Bureau*, 16 January 2018, www.census.gov/library/publications/1872/dec/1870a. html.
3. Ambrose, p. 24.
4. Renehan, Edward. *The Transcontinental Railroad : The Gateway to the West.* Chelsea House, 2007, p. 19.
5. Ambrose, p. 369.
6. Amrose, p. 370.
7. Hillstrom, Laurie Collier. *The Muckrakers and the Progressive Era.* Omnigraphics, 2009, p. 32.
8. Hillstrom, p. 28.
9. Roosevelt, Theodore. "The Man with the Muck-rake." *American Rhetoric*, 29 September 2018, **www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/teddyrooseveltmuckrake.htm**.
10. Roosevelt.

Magazines

5



Magazines survive, even prosper, by meeting the highly specialized interests of their readers.

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1729 Ben Franklin's *Pennsylvania Gazette*
1741 ▶ *American Magazine, or a Monthly View of the Political State of the British Colonies* and *General Magazine and Historical Chronicle, for All the British Plantations in America,* the first American magazines
1741–1794 45 new American magazines appear

1800

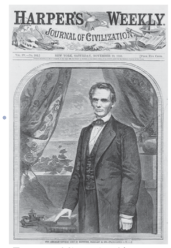
1821 *Saturday Evening Post*



Library of Congress, [LC-USZC4-5309]

1850

1850 ▶ *Harper's*
1857 *Atlantic Monthly*
1879 Postal Act



Everett Historical/ Shutterstock

1900

1910 *Crisis*
1914 Audit Bureau of Circulations founded
1922 *Reader's Digest*
1923 ▶ *Time*
1925 *New Yorker*
1936 *Consumers Union Reports*
1939 NBC unveils TV at World's Fair



John Frost Newspapers/ Alamy Stock Photo

1950

1956 *Collier's* closes
1969 *Saturday Evening Post* closes
1971 ▶ *Look* closes; *Ms.* magazine
1972 *Life* closes
1994 *Salon* goes online; QR code invented
1996 *Slate* goes *online*



Apic/Hulton Archive/ Getty Images

2000

2010 Magazine Publishers of America becomes Association of Magazine Media
2012 Audit Bureau of Circulations renamed Alliance for Audited Media
2013 The *Atlantic*'s Scientology controversy
2014 ▶ *Ladies' HomeJournal* ceases print publication
2016 *Prevention* goes ad-free
2017 Getty Images bans altered photos; #MeToo
2018 Kavanaugh Supreme Court nomination controversy
2019 *Redbook* halts print publication; *Seventeen* and *Glamour* become "digital first"
2020 Coronavirus in the US; half of all major titles reduce print frequency; "Say Their Names"; website MSN replaces journalists with AI



Andrew Burton/Getty Images News/Getty Images

ALTHOUGH YOU'D HEARD THE RUMORS AND THOUGHT YOU WERE READY FOR WHAT MIGHT COME, YOU ARE STILL IN SHOCK AFTER LEAVING THE MEETING WITH YOUR MANAGER.

When you started at *More* you thought you'd made it. Twenty years in business and a million subscribers. Stories for smart, professional women, and none of that Photoshop stuff. But now it's gone, closed. Your manager would like you to move to a new magazine. It's *Eat This, Not That!,* based on an advice column from *Men's Health* magazine that became a book series. It features articles on topics such as nutrition-wise recipes and how to make good decisions when eating at fancy restaurants.

But you're thinking this really isn't up your alley; you're a general-interest sort of person. Recipes and nutrition seem, well, narrow. Maybe you'll leave the magazine business altogether. The handwriting seems to be on the wall. More than half of all major titles reduced their print frequency in 2020 (**Williams, 2020**).

Redbook, with 2 million subscribers and publishing since 1903, ended its life as a print publication in 2019. That same year saw the last of 64-year-old *Mad Magazine* and 85-year-old *Brides*, and *Seventeen* and *Glamour* became "digital first," printing stand-alone issues tied to special issues and events. *Jet*, the 63-year-old "bible" of African American readers, closed in 2014; so did *Ladies' Home Journal* after 130 years and with more than 3 million subscribers. But maybe the handwriting isn't so clear; there are quite a few new magazines hitting the stands—at least 139 in 2019 alone and another 60 in pandemic-plagued 2020 (**Association of Magazine Media, 2020**; **Meek, 2020**).

Perhaps you can stay in magazines but move to the digital side. There are a lot of new digital-only publications starting up: *Podster* has been a hit with podcasters, and *SeniorsSkiing* is doing well with aging Baby Boomers. Maybe the Web *is* the way to go. But even there the evidence is inconclusive. The first Web-only magazines, *Slate* and *Salon*, are profitable, and there has indeed been a lot of exciting activity—*Vice* has a huge online presence, *Allure* and *Vanity Fair* launched digital video channels to enrich their online presence, and traditional books such as *The Atlantic* and *Esquire* publish weekly digital mini-mags exclusively for mobile devices. Big magazine companies such as Time Inc., Forbes, Condé Nast, and Hearst have even dropped the title "publisher" from their organizational charts, replaced by "chief business officer" and "chief industry officer." Although online magazines seem promising, they have yet to replace their lost print ad revenues with money from their digital operations (much like the situation with newspapers). So maybe you'll just stay with what you love. *Eat This, Not That!* it is!



▼ After 130 years in business and with more than 3 million subscribers, *Ladies' Home Journal* closed shop in 2014.

Andrew Burton/Getty Images News/ Getty Images

In this chapter, we examine the dynamics of the contemporary magazine industry— print and online—and its audiences. We study the medium's beginnings in the colonies, its pre–Civil War expansion, and its explosive growth between the Civil War and World War I. This was the era of the great mass circulation magazines, and it was also the time of the powerful writers known as muckrakers.

Influenced by television and by the social and cultural changes that followed World War II, the magazine took on a new, more narrowly focused nature, which provided the industry with a growing readership and increased profits. We detail the various categories of magazines, discuss circulation research, and look at the ways the industry protects itself from competition from other media and how advertisers influence editorial

decisions. The influence of convergence runs through all these issues. Finally, we investigate some of the editorial decisions that should be of particular interest to media-literate magazine consumers.

A Short History of Magazines

Magazines, the word shares etymological roots with "storehouse" (**Heller, 2021**), were a favorite medium of the British elite by the mid-1700s, and two prominent colonial printers hoped to duplicate that success in the New World. In 1741 in Philadelphia, Andrew Bradford published *The American Magazine, or a Monthly View of the Political State of the British Colonies*, followed by Benjamin Franklin's *General Magazine and Historical Chronicle, for All the British Plantations in America.* Composed largely of reprinted British material, these publications were expensive and aimed at the small number of literate colonists. Without an organized postal system, distribution was difficult, and neither magazine was successful. *American Magazine* produced three issues; *General Magazine* produced six. Yet between 1741 and 1794, 45 new magazines appeared, although no more than three were publishing at the same time. Entrepreneurial printers hoped to attract educated, cultured, moneyed gentlemen by copying the successful London magazines. Even after the Revolutionary War, American magazines remained clones of their British forerunners.

The Early Magazine Industry
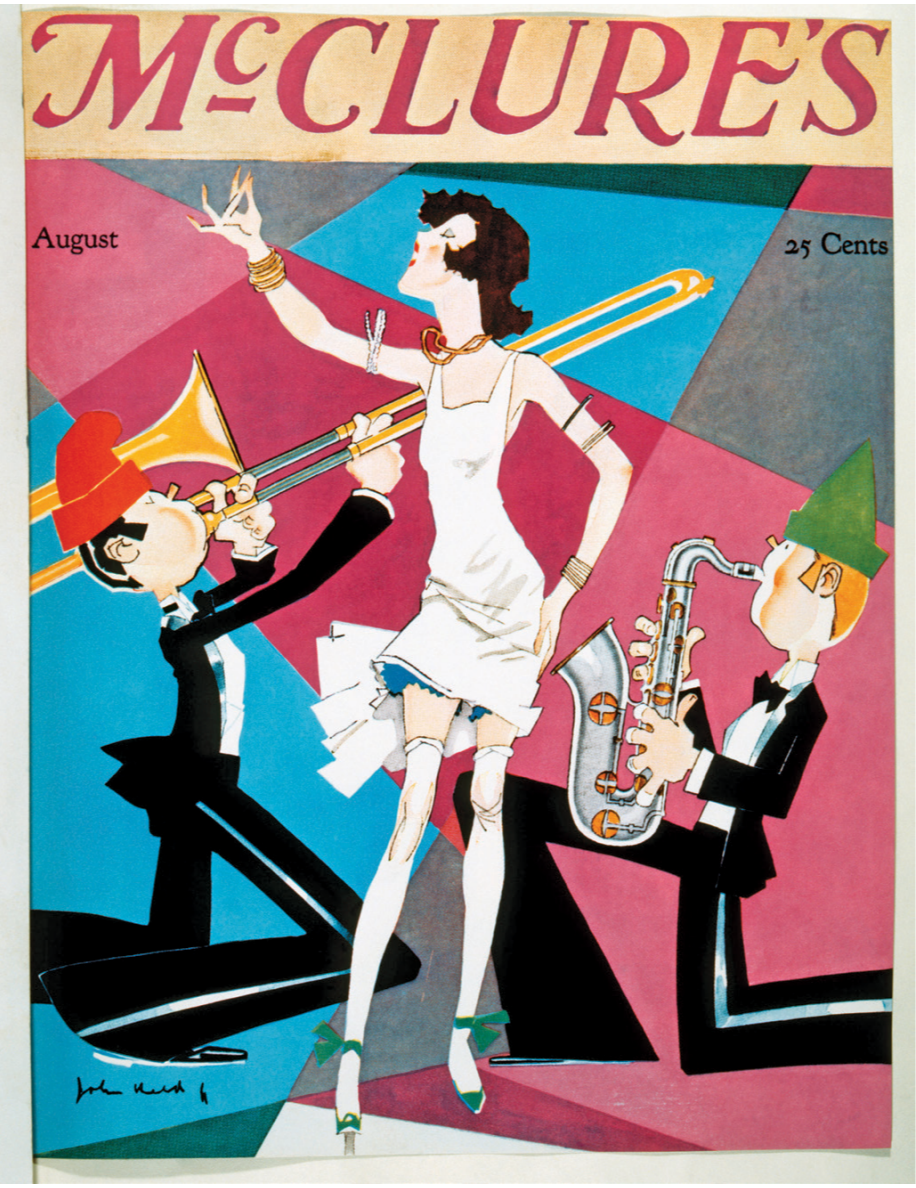
In 1821, *The Saturday Evening Post* appeared. Starting in 1729 as Ben Franklin's *Pennsylvania Gazette*, it was to continue for the next 148 years. Among other successful early magazines were *Harper's* (1850) and *Atlantic Monthly* (1857). Cheaper printing and growing literacy fueled the expansion of the magazine as they had for the book (see **Chapter 3** for more on books). However, an additional factor in the success of early magazines was the spread of social movements such as abolitionism and labor reform. These issues provided compelling content, and a boom in magazine publishing began. In 1825, there were 100 magazines in operation; 25 years later, there were 600. Because magazine articles increasingly focused on matters of importance to American readers, publications such as the *United States Literary Gazette* and *American Boy* began to look less like London publications and more like a new and unique product.

Journalism historians John **Tebbel and Mary Ellen Zuckerman (1991**) called this "the time of significant beginnings" (p. 13); it was during this time that the magazine developed many of the characteristics we associate with it today. Magazines and the people who staffed them began to clearly differentiate themselves from other publishing endeavors, such as books and newspapers. The concept of specialist writers took hold, and their numbers rose. In addition, numerous and detailed illustrations began to fill the pages of magazines.

Still, these early magazines were aimed at a literate elite interested in short stories, poetry, social commentary, and essays. The magazine did not become a true national mass medium until after the Civil War.

The Mass Circulation Era

The modern era of magazines can be divided into two parts: the mass circulation era and the era of specialization, each characterized by a different relationship between medium and audience.



▼ This *McClure's* cover captures the spirit of the Roaring Twenties as well as the excitement of the burgeoning magazine industry.

JT Vintage/Glasshouse Images/ Alamy Stock Photo

Popular mass circulation magazines began to prosper in the post–Civil War years. In 1865 there were 700 magazines publishing; by 1870 there were 1,200, and by 1885 there were 3,300. Crucial to this expansion was the women's magazine. Suffrage—women's right to vote—was the social movement that occupied its pages, but a good deal of content could also be described as how-to for homemakers. Advertisers, too, were eager to appear in the new women's magazines, hawking their brand-name products. First published at this time were several magazines still familiar today, such as *Good Housekeeping.*

There were several reasons for this phenomenal growth. As with books, widespread literacy was one reason. Two other reasons were the Postal Act of 1879, which permitted mailing magazines at

cheaper, second-class postage rates, and the spread of the railroad, which carried people and publications westward from the East Coast. A fourth reason was the reduction in cost. As long as magazines sold for 35 cents—a lot of money for the time—they were read largely by the upper class. However, a circulation war erupted between giants *McClure's*, *Munsey's Magazine*, and *The Saturday Evening Post.* Soon they, as well as *Ladies' Home Journal*, *McCall's*, *Woman's Home Companion*, *Collier's*, and *Cosmopolitan*, were selling for as little as 10 and 15 cents, which brought them within reach of many working people.

This 1870s price war was made possible by the newfound ability of magazines to attract growing amounts of advertising. Social and demographic changes in the post-Civil War era—urbanization, industrialization, the spread of roads and railroads, and development of consumer brands and brand names—produced an explosion in the number of advertising agencies (see **Chapter 8**). These agencies needed to place their messages somewhere. Magazines were the perfect outlet because they were read by a large, national audience. As a result, circulation—rather than reputation, as had been the case before—became the most important factor in setting advertising rates. Magazines kept cover prices low to ensure the large readerships coveted by advertisers. The fifth reason for the enormous growth in the number of magazines was industrialization, which provided people with leisure time to read and more personal income to spend.

Magazines were truly America's first national mass medium. Unlike newspapers, they were national in distribution and scope of coverage, and unlike books, they were inexpensive and meant for a large, general audience. Like books, they served as an important force in social change, especially in the **muckraking** era of the first decades of the 20th century. Theodore Roosevelt coined this label as an insult, but the muckrakers wore it proudly, using the pages of *The Nation*, *Harper's Weekly*, *The Arena*, and even mass circulation publications such as *McClure's* and *Collier's* to agitate for change. Their targets were the powerful. Their beneficiaries were the poor. You can read more about magazines' continuing political and social influence in the essay "Magazines and #MeToo."

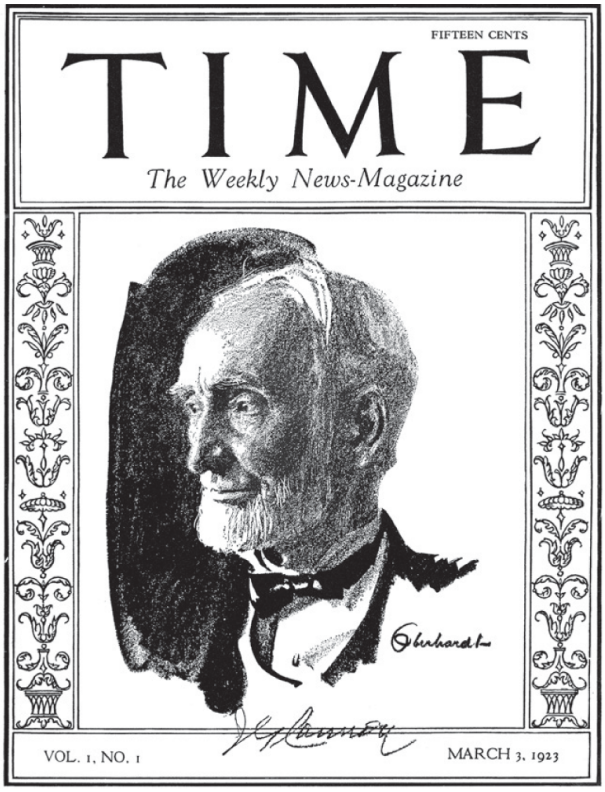
The mass circulation magazine grew with the nation, affirming "the progress and promise of American life," in the 1913 words of the first issue of the modern *Vanity Fair* (**Chayka, 2019**, p. 48). From the start, there were general interest magazines such as *The Saturday Evening Post*, women's magazines such as *Good Housekeeping*, pictorial magazines such as *Life* and *Look*, and digests such as *Reader's Digest*, which was first published in 1922 and offered condensed and tightly edited articles for people on the go in the Roaring Twenties. What these magazines all had in common were the size and breadth of readership. They were mass market, mass circulation publications, both national and affordable. As such, magazines helped unify the nation. They were the country's dominant advertising medium, the primary source for nationally distributed news, and the preeminent provider of photojournalism.

Between 1900 and 1945, the number of families who subscribed to one or more magazines grew from 200,000 to more than 32 million. New and important magazines continued to appear throughout these decades. For example, African American intellectual W. E. B. DuBois founded and edited *The Crisis* in 1910 as the voice of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). *Time* was first published in 1923. Its brief review of the week's news was immediately popular (it was originally only 28 pages long), and it made a profit within a year. *The New Yorker*, "the world's best magazine," debuted in 1925.



▼ Much respected today, *Harp-er's* gave early voice to the muck-rakers and other serious observers of politics and society.

Everett Historical/Shutterstock



▲ The first issue of *Time*.

John Frost Newspapers/Alamy Stock Photo

CULTURAL FORUM

Magazines and #MeToo

In its October 23, 2017, issue, *The New Yorker* broke the story of powerful Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein's years of sexual harassment, assault, and even rape against several women. Scores of other victims immediately came forward. One, actor Alyssa Milano, took to Twitter to post "#MeToo," a phrase (and sentiment) coined in 2006 by social activist and community organizer Tarana Burke. Weinstein was fired and arrested (he was convicted of rape in the third degree in February, 2020), the magazine won a Pulitzer Prize for the article, millions more women posted #MeToo, and a movement was born.

A month later, on November 29, *Variety* published an account of multiple sexual harassment complaints against the *Today Show*'s long-time host, Matt Lauer. His network, NBC, fired him that same day. The mistreatment of women in the United States (currently ranked 53rd in the world in gender equality; **Zahidi, 2020**) was now firmly in

the cultural forum, where it should have been all along, thanks to several brave women and magazines. “Virtually overnight,” wrote *Washington Post* commentator Eugene **Robinson (2017)**, “the paradigm for thinking about and dealing with sexual harassment has changed. A kind of Judgment Day has arrived for men who thought they had gotten away with their misdeeds.” Dozens of influential film and TV executives, high-profile politicians, well-known entertainers, respected journalists—men long comfortable abusing women—quickly became unemployed and were publicly shamed.

But magazines weren’t done. *Time* named those who came forward with their stories of abuse, “the Silence Breakers,” its 2017 Persons of the Year (**Zacharek, Dockterman, & Edwards, 2017**). Then, in August, 2018, the *New Yorker* detailed several charges of sexual harassment, abuse, and intimidation against CBS’s chair and CEO Les Moonves. He, too, was immediately fired. And magazines still weren’t done. In the midst of the contentious Brett Kavanaugh Supreme Court confirmation hearings three months later, *The New Yorker*, in its September 23 issue, published an account of a new accusation against the nominee. Its cover for October 8, 2018, 2 days after Judge Kavanaugh was elevated to the highest court in the country despite those credible allegations of sexual misconduct, was an image of a woman silenced, a hand across her mouth.

Where magazines had helped thrust the issue of women’s mistreatment into the cultural forum, magazines themselves soon became part of the #MeToo conversation. When Walmart announced it would pull

Cosmopolitan from the checkout lines in its 5,000 stores “in response to #MeToo,” the magazine’s defenders protested. Business journalist Kate **Taylor (2018)** agrees that *Cosmopolitan* has not always represented women realistically or inclusively; however, she adds, “There can and should be discussions about how *Cosmopolitan* helps and hurts women. But to blame a publication primarily aimed at and created by women for the systematic harassment and assault many women endure—often at the hands of men—is an embarrassing repurposing of the #MeToo movement.” Moreover, along with stories of the ilk of “20 Ways to Turn Him On,” *Cosmo* has a long tradition of offering serious writing on women’s political and social issues, including #MeToo.

Enter Your Voice

- Can you reconcile magazines’ contribution to women’s rights and welfare with their sometimes narrow and stereotypical representation of those very same people? This is a paragraph of placeholder text. It is only here to help show the layout of the page and how the text will flow. Replace this placeholder text with your own meaningful content.
- Should there be a greater emphasis on increasing the number of female journalists among their ranks, as there is among Bloomberg publications; using more women as sources for stories; and even forbidding their reporters from appearing on panels that do not have gender diversity (**Guaglione, 2018**)?
- Can you speculate on how magazines, dependent on the good will of advertisers and readers alike, might be able to contribute to the cultural forum in these increasingly

politically divisive times?



In 2017 the *New Yorker* broke the story of movie producer Harvey Weinstein's years of sexual harassment, assault, and rape, kickstarting the #MeToo movement.

Sundry Photography/Shutterstock

The Era of Specialization

In 1956 *Collier's* declared bankruptcy and became the first of the big mass circulation magazines to cease publication. But its fate, as well as that of other mass circulation magazines, had actually been sealed in the late 1940s and 1950s following the end of World War II. Profound alterations in the nation's culture—and, in particular, the advent of television— changed the relationship between magazines and their audience. No matter how large their circulation, magazines could not match the reach of television. Magazines did not have moving pictures or visual and oral storytelling. Nor could magazines match television's timeliness. Magazines were weekly, whereas television was continuous. Nor could they match television's novelty. In the beginning, *everything* on television was of interest to viewers. As a result, magazines began to lose advertisers to television.





▸ A change in people's tastes in magazines reflects some of the ways the world changed after World War II. *Vogue's* America replaced that of *Look*.

(left) Nathaniel Noir/Alamy Stock Photo; (right) Apic/Hulton Archive/ Getty Images



▸ A wide array of specialized magazines exists for all lifestyles and interests. Here are some of the 7,200 special interest consumer magazines available to American readers.

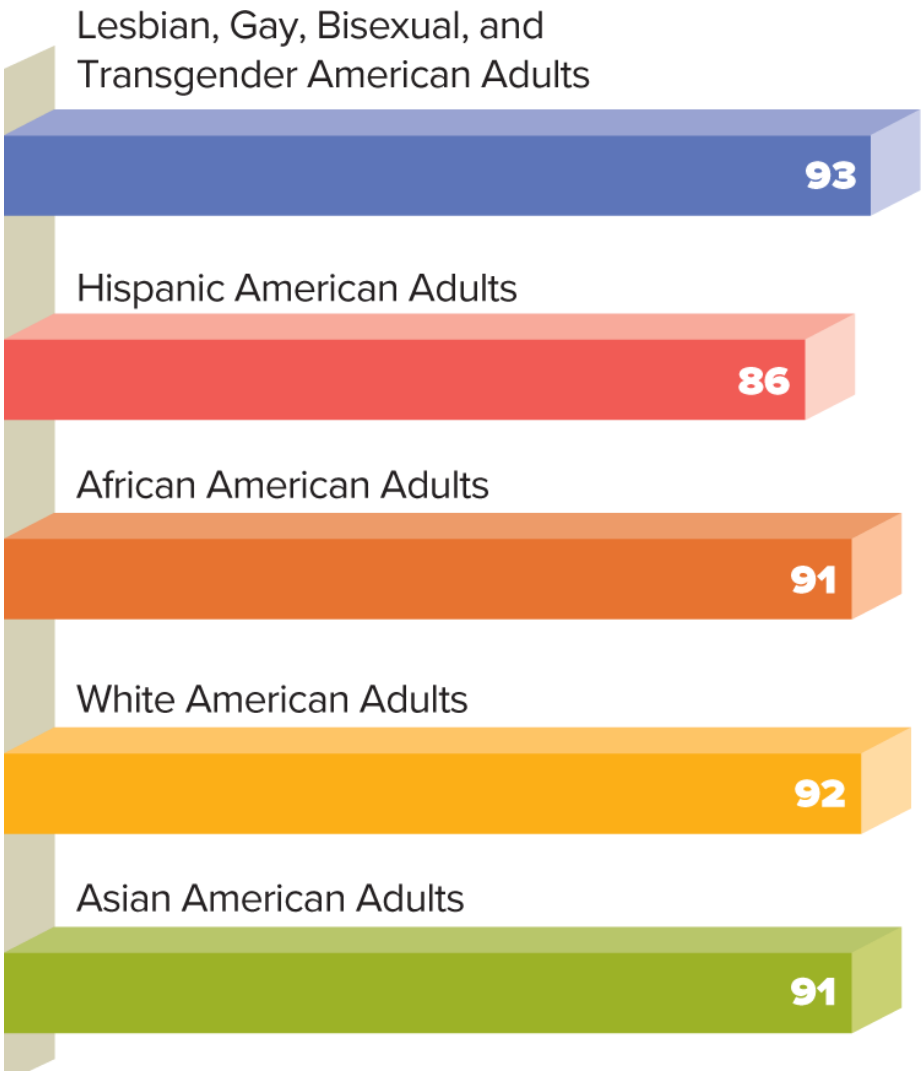
Susan Baran

The audience changed as well. As we've seen, World War II changed the nature of American life. The new, mobile, product-consuming public was less interested in the traditional Norman Rockwell world of *The Saturday Evening Post* (closed in 1969) and more in tune with the slick, hip

world of narrower interest publications such as *GQ* and *Esquire*, which spoke to them about their new and exciting lives. And because World War II had further urbanized and industrialized America, people—including millions of women who had entered the workforce— had more leisure and more money to spend. They could spend both on a wider array of personal interests *and* on magazines that catered to those interests. Where there were once *Look* (closed in 1971) and *The Saturday Evening Post*, there were now *Flyfishing*, *Surfer*, *Creative Scrapbooker*, and *Easyriders.* The industry had hit on the secret of success: specialization and a lifestyle orientation. All media have moved in this direction in their efforts to attract an increasingly fragmented audience, but it was the magazine industry that began the trend.

Magazines and Their Audiences

Exactly who is the audience for magazines? Industry research indicates that it is large–across print, digital, and video platforms, America's 229 million magazine readers interact with magazines 1.7 billion times a month across print and digital media. And it is a demographically attractive audience. Ninety-one percent of American adults consume magazines either in print or digital form, a proportion that grows to 95% when considering only people younger than 25. They read on average 7.3 print magazines a month. It is a diverse audience, as these data remain near constant across all ethnicities, as you can see in **Figure 5.1**. Additionally, magazines tend to have an educated and affluent audience, as they are the preferred medium among households with a net worth over $250,000 (all data from **Association of Magazine Media, 2020**).



▲ **Figure 5.1** Percentage of Population that Regularly Reads Magazines, 2020.

Source: Association of Magazine Media. 2020. Magazine Media Factbook 2020.

How readers use magazines also makes them an attractive advertising medium. Magazines sell themselves to potential advertisers based not only on the number and demographic desirability of their readers but also on readers' engagement with and affinity for magazine advertising. **Engagement** refers to the depth of the relationship between readers and the magazine advertising they see. People choose to read specific magazines for specific reasons. They have an existing interest that brings them to a particular publication. As a result, the magazine and its ads speak to them.

In addition, as opposed to many other media (radio and television, for example), readers' commitment to the magazine, and by extension its sponsors, is manifested in cash; that is, they pay to access that advertising. The success of publications such as *Wine Spectator*, *Cigar Aficionado*, *Whisky Advocate*, and *Scrap & Stamp Arts Magazine* rests heavily on readers' passion for their content, both editorial and commercial. **Affinity**, how much readers enjoy magazine advertising, is demonstrated by industry research showing that readers say not only that they trust magazine advertising more than Internet and television advertising but also that they value it as a way to learn about new products. It touches them deeply, gets them to try new things, inspires them to buy things, gives them something to talk about, and brings to mind things they enjoy (all data from **Association of Magazine Media, 2020**).

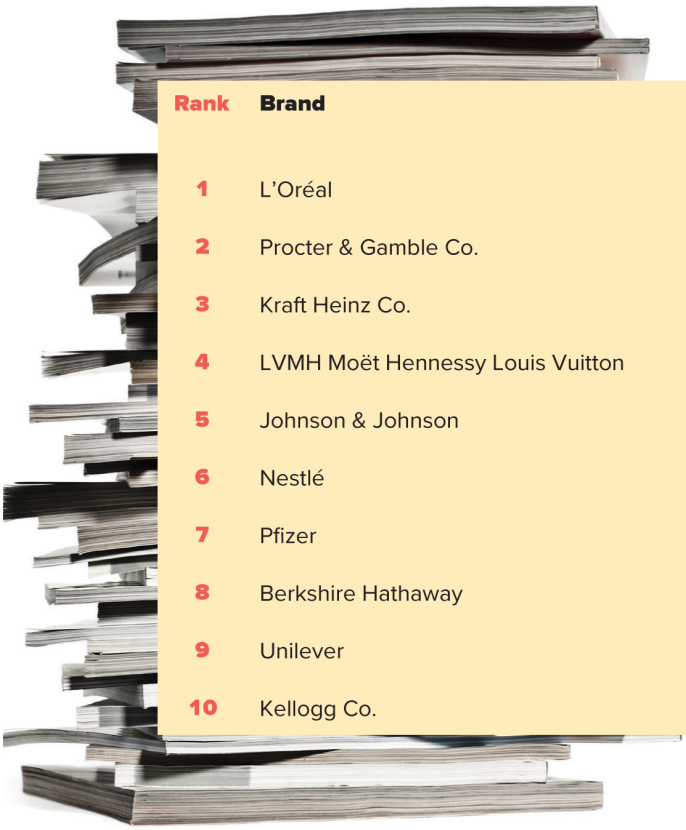
Scope and Structure of the Magazine Industry

In 1950, there were 6,950 magazines in operation. The number now exceeds 20,000, some 7,200 of which are general-interest consumer magazines. Of these, 800 produce about 75% of the industry's gross revenues. Contemporary magazines are typically divided into three broad types:

- *Trade, professional,* and *business magazines* carry stories, features, and ads aimed at people in specific professions and are distributed either by the professional organizations themselves *(American Medical News)* or by third-party companies such as DTN *(Progressive Farmer).*
- *Industrial, company,* and *sponsored magazines* are produced by companies specifically for their own employees, customers, and stockholders, or by clubs and associations specifically for their members. *Boy's Life*, for example, is the magazine of the Boy Scouts of America. *VIA* is the travel magazine for AAA auto club members in eight Western states.
- *Consumer magazines* are sold by subscription and at newsstands, bookstores, and other retail outlets, including supermarkets, garden shops, and computer stores. *Sunset* and *Wired* fit in this category, as do *Road & Track*, *Us Weekly*, *TV Guide*, and *The New Yorker.*

Magazine Advertising

Magazine specialization exists and succeeds because the demographically similar readership of individual publications is attractive to advertisers. Marketers want to target ads for their products and services to those most likely to respond to them, so the typical editorial-to-advertising-page ratio is 54% to 46%. Despite revenue declines over the last few years (a drop of 9.7% from 2019 to 2020), this remains a lucrative situation for the magazine industry ($10.9 billion in ad revenue in 2020, roughly half of all income). Magazines command 4% of all the dollars spent on major media advertising in this country (**Liesse, 2020**). And of particular importance to marketers, the return on advertising dollars spent is higher for magazines than for any other medium (**Association of Magazine Media, 2020**). The brands that buy the most magazine advertising are shown in **Figure 5.2**.



Rank	Brand	Amount Spent (in millions)
1	L'Oréal	$690
2	Procter & Gamble Co.	$444
3	Kraft Heinz Co.	$315
4	LVMH Moët Hennessy Louis Vuitton	$211
5	Johnson & Johnson	$202
6	Nestlé	$199
7	Pfizer	$197
8	Berkshire Hathaway	$191
9	Unilever	$164
10	Kellogg Co.	$163

Figure 5.2 Top 10 Magazine Advertisers, 2019.

Source: "Biggest U.S. spenders by medium," 2019.
(photo): Creative Crop/Digital Vision/Getty Images



▲ Like many national magazines, *The Week* offers accountability guarantees.

Tony Farrugia/Alamy Stock Photo

Magazines are often further specialized through **split runs**, special versions of a given issue in which editorial content and ads vary according to some specific demographic or regional grouping. *People,* for example, will sell A-B splits in which every other copy of the national edition will carry a different cover, regional splits by state and by major metropolitan area, and splits targeting the top 10 and top 20 largest metropolitan areas.

Magazines work to make themselves attractive to advertisers in other ways, especially as the industry, like all traditional media, deals with tough economic conditions. One strategy is *single-sponsor magazines*—having only one advertiser throughout an entire issue. Venerable titles such as *The New Yorker* (Target stores) and *Time* (Kraft foods) occasionally employ this tactic.

Another strategy is to make *accountability guarantees.*

The Week, for example, promises that independent testing will demonstrate that its readers recall, to an agreed-upon level, a sponsor's ad; if they do not, the advertiser will receive free ad pages until recall reaches that benchmark. Many of the large publishers—Meredith, Hearst, Condé Nast, and Time Inc., for example—also offer similar guarantees. (For a look at a magazine with no advertising at all, see the essay "No Ads? No Problem: *Consumer Reports*.")

Types of Circulation

Magazines price advertising space in their pages based on **circulation**, the total number of issues of a magazine that are sold. These sales can be either subscription or single-copy sales. For the industry as a whole, about 92% of all sales are subscription. Some magazines, however—*Woman's Day*, *TV Guide*, and *Women's World*, for example—rely heavily on single-copy sales. Subscriptions have the advantage of an ensured ongoing readership, but they are sold below the cover price and have the additional burden of postage included in their cost to the publisher. Single-copy sales are less reliable, but to advertisers,

they are sometimes a better barometer of a publication's value to its readers. Single-copy readers must consciously choose to pick up an issue, and they pay full price for it. It was just such a demonstration of reader enthusiasm that convinced Meredith to return *Coastal Living* to subscription sales in 2019 after having shifted it to newsstand-only a year earlier. Nonetheless, newsstand sales overall have shown declines for several years now.

A third form of circulation, **controlled circulation**, refers to providing a magazine at no cost to readers who meet some specific set of advertiser-attractive criteria. Free airline and hotel magazines fit this category. Although they provide no subscription or single-sales revenue, these magazines are an attractive, relatively low-cost advertising vehicle for companies seeking narrowly defined, captive audiences. United Airlines's *Hemispheres*, for example, has 158 million annual readers with a median household net worth of just over half a million dollars, the highest of any American print magazine. They're well educated, too, as 91% have a college education (***Hemispheres*, 2020**). These "custom publishing" magazines are discussed in more detail later in this chapter.



▼ Controlled circulation magazines such as United Airlines's *Hemispheres* take advantage of readers' captivity, offering them high-quality travel-oriented fare. They offer advertisers access to a well-educated, affluent readership.

Marco Arguello/Courtesy of Hemispheres Magazine

USING MEDIA TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

No Ads? No Problem: *Consumer Reports*

Very few magazines survive today without accepting advertising. Those that are ad-free insist that freedom from commercial support allows them to make a greater difference in the lives of their readers. For example, *Ms.* cannot advocate development of strong, individual females if its pages carry ads that suggest beauty is crucial for women's success. It is published four times a year, maintains an online version, carries no advertising, and remains committed to advancing the cause of women and feminism on a global scale.

In 2016, *Prevention* decided to go ad-free in order to return "to its historical position as an authoritative, impartial voice in the health and wellness community" (**Dool, 2016**). And there is *Kazoo*, aimed at girls aged 5 to 12. The quarterly is not only ad-free, it's print-only. Featuring contributors like Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Jane Goodall, and Ellen DeGeneres, in 2019 it became the first children's magazine ever to win a National Magazine Award for General Excellence (**Dool, 2019**).

But it is *Consumer Reports* that makes the no-advertising case most strongly—it must be absolutely free of outside influence if its articles about consumer products are to maintain their well-earned reputation for fairness and objectivity. As its editors explain on the magazine's website, their mission is to test products and services and inform and protect consumers, all the while remaining independent and impartial. To do this, the magazine accepts no outside advertising, nor does it accept free products for its testing. Its only agenda is the interests of consumers. So protective is the magazine of that independence that it refuses to let its ratings be used in any advertising of the products and services it evaluates, even those that it judges superior. It can earn as much as $300,000 per advertised endorsement but refuses.

Consumer Reports, first published in 1936 as *Consumer Union Reports* and boasting an initial circulation of 400, charges for access to its Web version. Its 3.2 million online subscribers pay the same rate as its 3.8 million print readers. Nonetheless, its online readership is among the highest of the world's online magazines, and its print circulation is higher than that of all but a few major magazines, exceeding that of titles like *Good Housekeeping*, *Sports Illustrated*, and *People*.

The online version does offer a good deal of free information, especially when evaluated products may cause health and safety problems. Also occasionally available for free is special content, such as an ongoing series of media literacy videos examining the persuasive appeals used in consumer drug advertising. But subscribers have access to much more. For example, there are videos of front and side impact tests on just about every vehicle sold in this country. The *Consumer Reports* website maintains a

searchable archive of all tests and their results as well as up-to-the-minute evaluations of new products.

Because the electronic version has no paper, printing, trucking, or mailing expenses, it actually makes more money than its print sibling. To increase profits on its print version, *Consumer Reports* is produced on less expensive paper rather than the glossy stock used by most magazines, and as a nonprofit group, it pays lower postage rates than other consumer magazines.

Another magazine that eschews advertising because it sees it as inimical to its larger mission of making a difference with its particular category of reader is *Adbusters.* Founded in 1992, *Adbusters* boasts a worldwide print circulation of 120,000 and won the *Utne Reader* Award for General Excellence three times in its first six years of operation. It aims to help stem the erosion of the world's physical and cultural environments by what it views as greed and commercial forces. Its online version allows users to download spoofs of popular ad campaigns and other anticonsumerism spots for use as banner ads on their own sites.

Measuring Circulation

Regardless of how circulation occurs, it is monitored through research. The Audit Bureau of Circulations (ABC) was established in 1914 to provide reliability to a booming magazine industry playing loose with self-announced circulation figures. In 2012, recognizing that "circulation" should include digital editions and apps, the ABC became platform agnostic and renamed itself the Alliance for Audited Media (AAM). The AAM provides reliable circulation figures as well as important population and demographic data.

Circulation data are often augmented by measures of *pass-along readership,* which refers to readers who neither subscribe nor buy single copies but who borrow a magazine or read one in places like a doctor's office or library. For example, *The Costco Connection*, free to the big box retailer's "executive members" and available to others for a $120 annual subscription, has a monthly circulation of 14.3 million copies. But with its pass-along readership, it reaches nearly 26 million people a month (**Meyersohn, 2020**).

"Readership" has traditionally included subscribers, pass-along readership, and newsstand sales for each issue. This traditional model of measurement, however, is under increasing attack. As advertisers demand more precise assessments of accountability and return on their investment, new metrics beyond circulation and readership are being demanded by professionals inside and outside the industry (see **Chapter 8**).

Timeliness is one issue. Monthly and weekly magazines can, at best, offer data on how many issues they've shipped, but advertisers must typically wait for days after a particular issue is released for actual readership numbers, and even longer than that for additional pass-along readership. It can take as long as 10 or more days for a magazine to reach 100% of its total readership.

Others argue that it is one thing for magazine publishers to boast of engagement and affinity, but how are they measured? As a result, the advertising and magazine industries are investing in new

measurement protocols. For example, in 2014, the Association of Magazine Media introduced Magazine Media 360°, a metric combining magazines' print audience, unique visitors to their Web and mobile sites, and unique video views of magazines' video channels (if any). This number is published monthly in addition to a second report that tracks magazines' presence on social media. You can see the Total 360° monthly audience for several popular titles in **Figure 5.3**. Note the huge jump in readership–in the tens of millions–when "readership" includes print and digital editions plus Internet, mobile, and video interactions. Nonetheless, for now, "mere" circulation remains the primary basis for setting magazine ad rates.

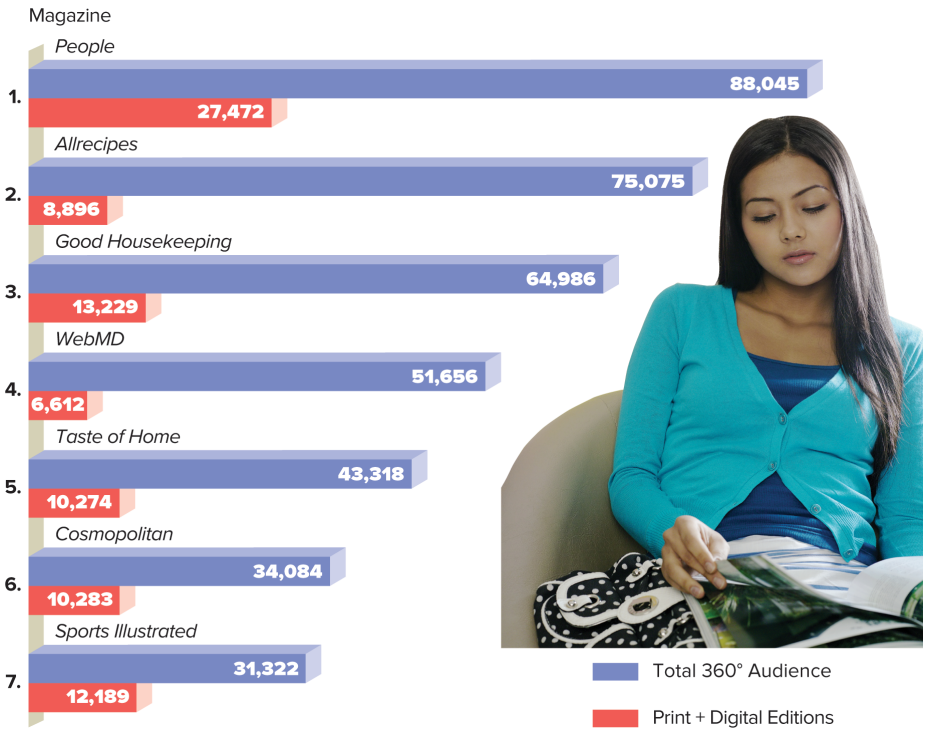


Figure 5.3 Top-Performing Total 360° Audience Magazines, in Thousands (000), December 2020.

Source: Alliance for Audited Media, 2021.
(photo): Image Source/Photodisc/ Getty Images

Several magazines, most prominently *Time*, offer advertisers the option of choosing between *total audience* and paid circulation when setting advertising rates. Total audience combines print and digital readership. An advertiser may be willing to pay more for those who buy subscriptions, assuming greater commitment to the magazine and its advertisers; another may prefer paying for as many readers as possible, paying a bit less for online readers. In *Time*'s case, for example, the paid circulation number of just over 3 million becomes a total audience of nearly six times that size.

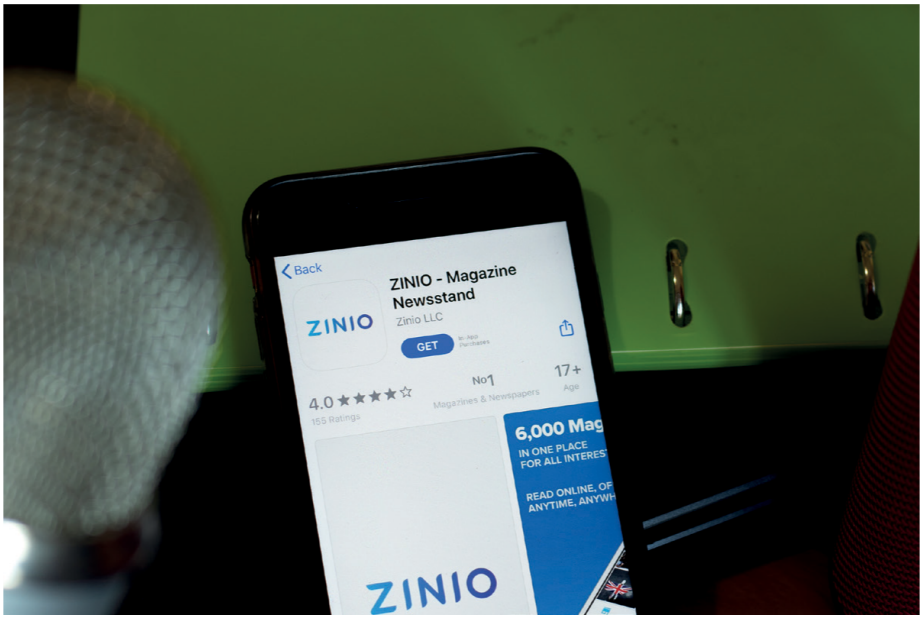
Trends and Convergence in Magazine Publishing

The magazine industry's embrace of *total audience* rather than *readership* when discussing its reach makes it clear that the forces that are reshaping all the mass media are having an impact on magazines. Although the industry was slow to evolve—"We survivors danced on the edge of the volcano, unwilling to admit that anything had changed," in the words of long-time *Gourmet* editor Ruth Reichl (in **Chayka, 2019**, p. 50)—the industry changed how it did business, especially to compete with television and the Internet in the race for advertising dollars. Convergence, too, has its impact.

Online Magazines

Online magazines have emerged, made possible by the convergence of magazines and the Internet. Rare is the magazine that does not produce a digital version, and almost all that do offer additional content and a variety of interactive features not available to readers of their hard-copy versions. Different publications opt for different payment models, but most provide online-only content for free and charge nonsubscribers for access to print magazine content that appears online. This strategy encourages readers who might otherwise go completely digital (and drop print) to renew their subscriptions. This is important to publishers and their advertisers because ads in hard-copy magazines are more effective and therefore more valuable: Print magazine advertising produces greater increases in brand awareness, brand favorability, and purchase intent than online magazine advertising (**Association of Magazine Media, 2020**).

In the early 2000s, both *Salon* and *Slate* wanted to do magazine journalism—a mix of breaking news, cultural criticism, political and social commentary, and interviews—at the Internet's speed with the Internet's interactivity and instant feedback. Although both pioneers regularly draw sizable audiences—*Salon* and *Slate* each have 10 million unique monthly readers world-wide—it took them both more than a decade to become profitable. One reason is that, as opposed to sites produced by paper magazines, purely online magazines must generate original content, an expensive undertaking, yet they compete online for readers and advertisers as equals with those subsidized by paper magazines. In addition, these sites must compete with all other websites on the Internet. They are but one of an infinite number of choices for potential readers, and they do not enjoy the security of an audience loyal to a parent publication.



▾ Zinio is among several apps that bring millions of on-the-go readers to magazine websites.

Postmodern Studio/Shutterstock

Smartphones, Tablets, and e-Readers

As with books and newspapers, mobile digital media are reshaping the relationship between magazines and their readers. In 2012, a group of major publishers came together to create Next Issue, a digital newsstand for magazines and newspapers. Bought by Apple, it's now know as Apple News+. For a relatively low monthly fee, readers gain full access to more than 200 publications, and in 2020, the company bundled Apple News+ with Apple TV+ and Apple Music in an attempt to attract an even larger audience for its services. There are a number of other digital subscription services operating as well. Magzter offers subscriptions to 8,000 titles; Zinio provides access to more than 6,000 magazines. Amazon Prime, through a feature called Prime Reading, gives its members access to a number of high-profile magazines. Mobile Web readership on both websites and apps now accounts for 36% of all magazine issues read, greatly exceeding desktop and laptop's 10% (**Association of Magazine Media, 2020**).



▾ Quick response codes have reached near ubiquity in the magazine industry.

leungchopan/YAY Media AS/Alamy Stock Photo

Magazines also thrive on social media. The number of followers and likes for magazines on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Pinterest exceeded 1.1 billion in the first quarter of 2019 alone. Facebook accounts for the largest share of magazines' social media activity, accounting for nearly half of the active audience. Instagram is second but is the fastest growing of the three, and Twitter is a close third (**Association of Magazine Media, 2020**).

And interestingly, smartphones and tablets now make hard-copy magazines more attractive to readers and advertisers now that quick response (QR) codes, invented in 1994, appear on virtually all consumer magazines. When readers use their smartphones to capture the image of these square barcodes containing smaller squares and rectangles inside, they are instantly directed to a publisher's or marketer's website, increasing engagement. About a third of American smartphone users routinely utilize QR codes, and the number of individual interactions has shown a steady increase, growing 36% between 2018 and 2019 alone (**Blue Bite, 2020**), contributing to the magazine industry's economic stability.

To enhance the reading experience, some magazines (*Cosmopolitan*, for example) have taken QR a step further, combining it with **augmented reality (AR)**, technology that lets users point phones at a magazine page and be instantly linked to websites containing information about whatever is on that page superimposed over the screen image. In one example, users can snap a photo of a QR code, which takes them to a Macy's department store website where they can, in AR, try-on outfits and test their new look. *InStyle* uses AR to give readers virtual make-overs for beauty product advertisers.

But magazines are also making dramatic editorial as well as advertising use of AR to meet their audiences' information needs. For example, in March, 2020, the *New York Times Magazine* encouraged readers to scan pages in its annual "25 Songs That Matter Right Now" edition using the Google Lens app. They would then hear the track and learn additional information about the song and its artist. The *New Yorker*, in the wake of the George Floyd murder, encouraged readers to "Say Their Name" by

pointing Google Lens at its June 22, 2020, cover (a painting by Kadir Nelson) to access a "closer read" of the lives and deaths of the people referenced in the painting, scores of African Americans killed by the police (**Dumenco, 2020**).

Even easier to use than QR codes and AR scanning are **near-field communication (NFC) chips**, tags embedded in magazines that connect readers to advertisers' digital content when they simply hold their smartphones near an ad; there is no need to have the correct app or to take a picture of a code.

Custom Magazines

Another trend finds its roots in the magazine industry's response to an increasingly crowded media environment. **Custom publishing** is the creation of magazines specifically designed for an individual company seeking to reach a very narrowly defined audience, such as favored customers or likely users or buyers. If you've ever stayed at an Airbnb home-sharing location, for example, you might well have come across *Airbnb Magazine*, distributed for free to member hosts. *WebMD*, the medical information website, distributes for free to 85% of all American doctors' offices a magazine of the same name. Its monthly print circulation of 1.4 million is read by more than 10 million people; its print and online editions reach one in four American adults every month (**WebMD, 2020**). Forty-one percent of business-to-customer marketers use custom print magazines, as do 36% of business-to-business marketers (**Spaight, 2016**). Naturally, such specifically targeted magazines take advantage of readers' engagement with and affinity for magazine advertising.

There are two broad categories of custom publishing. First, a **brand magazine** is a consumer magazine, complete with a variety of general interest articles and features, published by a retail or other business for readers with demographic characteristics similar to those of consumers with whom it typically does business. These publications carry ad pages not only for the products of their parent business but for others as well. Outdoor goods company REI's quarterly *Uncommon Path* has a monthly circulation of 700,000, making it the largest outdoor magazine in the country. Energy drink maker Red Bull publishes *Red Bulletin*; Kraft has been publishing *Food & Family* for more than 20 years; Staples's *Worklife* provides conversation starters and resources for professionals. A small but growing number of brand magazines (for example, Enterprise Car Rental's *Pursuits with Enterprise* and active wear maker Outdoor Voices' *The Recreationalist*) are digital-only. Brand magazines recognize two important contemporary realities of today's media environment: (a) The cost of retaining existing customers is significantly lower than that of recruiting new ones, and (b) in an increasingly hypercommercialized and cluttered mass media system, advertisers who want to connect with their customers can rely on the engagement and affinity inherent in a good magazine to overcome growing consumer cynicism and suspicion.

Closely related is the second category, the **magalogue**, a designer catalog produced to look like a consumer magazine. Abercrombie & Fitch, J.Crew, Harry Rosen, Saks Fifth Avenue, Net-A-Porter, Asos, Frank & Oak, Bergdorf Goodman, Uniqlo, and Diesel all produce catalogs in which models wear for-sale designer clothes. Designers, photographers, writers, and editors from major fashion magazines typically contribute to these publications, and they are occasionally available for sale at newsstands (for example, Net-A-Porter's *Porter*).

Meeting the Competition

As we've seen, the move toward specialization in magazines was forced by the emergence of television as a mass audience, national advertising medium. But television again— specifically cable television—eventually came to challenge the preeminence of magazines as a specialized advertising medium. Advertiser-supported cable channels prosper using precisely the same strategy as magazines—they deliver to advertisers a relatively large number of consumers who have some important demographic trait in common. Similar competition also comes from specialized online content providers, such as ESPN's several sports-oriented sites and the Discovery Channel Online. And of course, there is competition from the ultimate specialized advertising medium, the Internet itself. Magazines are well positioned to fend off these challenges for several reasons.



▲ There are 46 local-language editions of *Elle* in 60 countries across the globe.

JOEL SAGET/AFP/Getty Images

First is internationalization, which expands a magazine's reach, making it possible for magazines to attract additional ad revenues for content that, essentially, has already been produced. Internationalization can happen in one of several ways. Some magazines, *Time* and *Monthly Review,* for example, produce one or more foreign editions in English. Others enter cooperative agreements with overseas companies to produce native-language versions of essentially American magazines. For example, Hearst and the British company ITP cooperate to publish British and Middle Eastern editions of *Esquire*, two of the 18 international versions of the men's magazine. ITP and Hearst also team up on the Dubai version of the fashion magazine *Harper's Bazaar* and 75 other titles in the Middle East and India. Often, American publishers prepare special content for foreign-language editions. *Elle* has 46 local-language versions of its magazine, including countries like Argentina, Serbia, Poland, Thailand, and Turkey. *Vogue* offers 19 in locales such as China, Greece, and Portugal. *Cosmopolitan* has 64 international editions in 35 languages in 100 countries. The internationalization of magazines will no doubt increase as conglomeration and globalization continue to have an impact on the magazine industry as they have on other media businesses.

Second is technology. The Internet now allows instant distribution of copy from the editor's desk to printing plants around the world. The result is incredibly quick delivery to subscribers and

sales outlets, which makes production and distribution of even more narrowly targeted split runs more cost-effective. More controversial, however, is a different technology, **artificial intelligence (AI)**, the use of machine learning, to write "original" articles. Given the necessary information and a deep machine-learned familiarity with a magazine's style, artificial intelligence can produce seemingly human-authored pieces. Publications can produce most or all their routine copy such as reviews and calendars, if not more original work, quite inexpensively. For example, in mid-2020 Microsoft replaced its human journalists at its British MSN website with AI software to write news reports (**Waterson, 2020**), and although not yet in wider use, there is already at least one completely AI-written magazine, *Montag*.

Third is the sale of subscriber lists and a magazine's own direct marketing of products. Advertisers buy space in specialized magazines to reach a specific type of reader. Most magazines are more than happy to sell those readers' names and addresses to those same advertisers, as well as to others who want to contact readers with direct mail pitches. Many magazines use their own subscriber lists and Web visitors' details for the same purpose, marketing products and programs of interest to their particular readership.

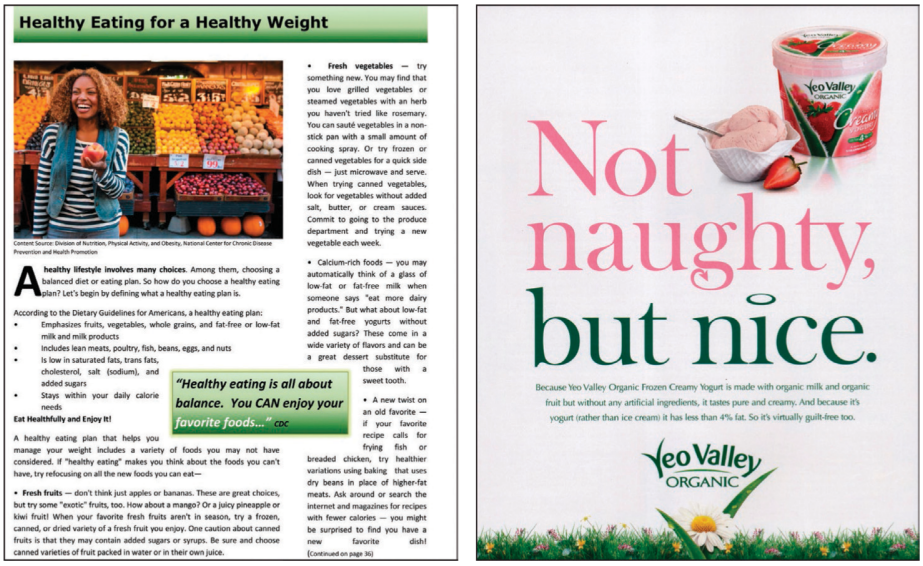
Increasingly, this is accomplished through *paid memberships*. *Fortune* has a 3-tiered membership that, at the highest level, offers quarterly investment guides, a weekly research newsletter, a video channel packed with exclusive interviews with executives and instructional content, and monthly conference calls hosted by the magazine's CEO. Members of *The Atlantic*'s program The Masthead have access to members-only forums where they can interact with the magazine's editors. There is increased reliance on licensing the magazine's good name (its brand) as well. The *Good Housekeeping* seal of approval and the *Playboy* bunny logo are already familiar, but other trusted titles such as *Better Homes & Gardens*, *Shape*, *Popular Science*, and *Variety* have begun partnering with related businesses in licensing deals that account for 20% to 30% of publications' revenues. In 2018 alone, Meredith generated $22.8 billion in licensing fees from its stable of magazines (**Smith, 2018**).



▲ Many magazines license their names—and reputations—to generate revenue. The Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval, initiated in 1909, is one of the better-known examples.

Susan Watts/New York Daily News/ Getty Images

Some magazines meet television's challenge by becoming television themselves. Fox Television Studios, for example, produces Web-based programs based on Hearst publications *CosmoGIRL!* and *Popular Mechanics*. *Allure*, and *Maxim* maintain video channels; *Teen Vogue* alone has five. *Vice*, which began in 1994 as the 16-page free publication *Voice of Montreal*, has an Emmy Award–winning news show on HBO and more than 50 video series across the Internet. Condé Nast has long had interests in film and video. Its Condé Nast Entertainment division produces big-budget movies (*No Exit*; *Argo*; *Eat, Pray, Love*) and several scripted and reality TV shows for a number of networks. It maintains five publication-specific studios (*GQ*, *New Yorker*, *Vanity Fair*, *Vogue*, and *Wired*). Mansueto Ventures, publishers of *Fast Company* and *Inc.*, produces several YouTube series, including *You Have to See This* and *Day in the Life*, which follows entrepreneurs.



Complementing this ad through placement near this story troubles few people, but some industry insiders see it as further breaching of the advertiser/ editorial divide.

(left) Image Source/Getty Images; (right) Courtesy of The Advertising Archives

Advertiser Influence over Magazine Content

Sometimes controversial is the influence that some advertisers attempt to exert over content. This influence is always there, at least implicitly. A magazine editor must satisfy advertisers as well as readers. One common way advertisers' interests shape content is in the placement of ads. Airline ads are moved away from stories about plane crashes. Cigarette ads rarely appear near articles on lung cancer. In fact, it is an accepted industry practice for a magazine to provide advertisers with a heads-up, alerting them that soon-to-be-published content may prove uncomfortable for their businesses. Advertisers can then request a move of their ad, or pull it and wait to run it in the next issue. Magazines, too, often entice advertisers with promises of placement of their ads adjacent to relevant articles.

But **complementary copy**—content that reinforces the advertiser's message, or at least does not negate it—is problematic when creating such copy becomes a major influence in a publication's editorial decision making. This happens in a number of ways. Editors sometimes engage in self-censorship,

making decisions about how stories are written and which stories appear based on the fear that specific advertisers will be offended. Some magazines, *Architectural Digest*, for example, identify companies by name in their picture caption copy only if they are advertisers, and Lexus asks the magazines it advertises in to use its automobiles in photos in editorial content. These concessions may be necessary today because the very competitive media environment puts additional pressure on magazines to bow to advertisers' demands. However, many critics inside and outside the industry see these moves as an unfortunate crumbling of the wall between advertising demands and editorial judgment. Others are not so concerned. Says one magazine editor, "As long as it's interesting to the reader, who cares? This ivory-tower approach that edit[orial] is so untouchable, and what they're doing is so wonderful and can't be tainted by the stink of advertising just makes me sick" (in **Ives, 2008**).

Another once-controversial and now far more common practice is sponsored content, articles paid for by advertisers. Sponsored content first caused controversy in early 2013, when the online edition of *The Atlantic* ran a long, laudatory article on the Church of Scientology. But it was quickly discovered that the piece was actually a paid placement written not by *Atlantic* journalists but by the Church of Scientology itself. A massive uproar ensued inside and outside the industry. But since that time, the practice has become not only commonplace across all media but also essential to many magazines' survival. Three-quarters of online publishers in the United States now offer sponsored content, sometimes called native advertising. And despite some continuing unease over the practice, most industry people have come to terms with what is an $85 billion annual global market (**Pollitt, 2020**). Still, to many the practice is inherently deceptive, otherwise why would it, in the words of the Native Advertising Institute itself, adopt "the form, feel and function of the content of the media on which it appears?" (in **Scott, 2020**).

The Federal Trade Commission agrees, writing, "Regardless of the medium in which an advertising or promotional message is disseminated, deception occurs when consumers acting reasonably under the circumstances are misled about its nature or source, and such misleading impression is likely to affect their decisions or conduct regarding the advertised product or the advertising" (in **Scott, 2020**). As such it now polices sponsored content, demanding clear identification. Among the allowable labels are "Ad," "Advertisement," "Paid Advertisement," "Sponsored Advertising Content," or some near variation. Prohibited are less definitive markers such as "Promoted" or "Promoted Stories" because they imply that the material is endorsed by the publisher.

DEVELOPING MEDIA LITERACY SKILLS

Recognizing the Power of Graphics

Detecting the use of and determining the informational value of complementary copy and sponsored content is only one reason media literacy is important when reading magazines. Another necessary media literacy skill is the ability to understand how graphics and other artwork provide the background for interpreting stories. Some notable incidents suggest why.

Kerry Washington, African American actor and star of the television series *Scandal*, appeared on an April 2016 cover of *Adweek*. Her skin had been lightened and her nose Photoshopped to appear smaller. *Adweek* denied it had made anything other than "minimal adjustments," but Ms. Washington and her fans felt otherwise. For them, this was especially disconcerting because it had happened to the star just a year earlier when *InStyle* lightened her skin to the point that she appeared to be Caucasian. Then, just a few weeks after the *Adweek* incident, *People*, in declaring tennis champion Serena Williams "one of the world's most beautiful people," published a photo of Ms. Williams that had been altered to slim her waist (**Sass, 2016**). A media-literate reader might ask, "Why isn't one of the world's most beautiful people beautiful enough?"

The subjects of magazines' digital alterations have weighed in on their own photographs' "improvements." Singer/actor Lady Gaga framed her objection to *Glamour's* touchup in media literacy terms: "I felt my skin looked too perfect. I felt my hair looked too soft. . . . I do not look like this when I wake up in the morning. . . . What I want to see is the change on your covers. . . . When the covers change, that's when culture changes" (**Calkins, 2016**). Actor Emily Ratajkowski took to Instagram to call out *Madame Figaro* magazine for changing her lips and breasts: "Everyone is uniquely beautiful in their own ways. We all have insecurities about the things that make us different from a typical ideal of beauty. I, like so many of us, try every day to work past those insecurities" (**Ledbetter, 2017**).



▼ After she was dramatically Photoshopped for a *Glamour* cover, Lady Gaga had a message for the magazine industry: "When the covers change, that's when culture changes."

Larry Busacca/Getty Images Entertainment/Getty Images

The American Medical Association found this common practice of altering images so harmful that at its 2011 annual meeting it voted to encourage magazine industry efforts to discontinue its use. The AMA board argued not only that altered images of women's bodies create unrealistic expectations in young people, but also that decades of social science research tie these unrealistic media images to eating disorders and other childhood and adolescent health problems.

Some, but not all, in the magazine industry have responded. *Seventeen*, acknowledging a teen-driven online movement to publish more unretouched photos, committed itself to a "Body Peace Treaty" in which it promised to never again change girls' body or face shapes and to begin including in its pages only images of girls and models who appear healthy. *Vogue* instituted its "Health Initiative," stating it would ban from its pages all models under 16 years old and super-skinny models who appear to have an eating disorder. And in 2017, Getty Images, the world's largest provider of stock photos, announced that it would no longer sell altered images.

An additional media literacy issue here has to do with maintaining the confidence of audience members. As digital altering of images becomes more widespread—and its occurrence better known—will readers come to question the veracity of even unaltered images and the truthfulness of the stories that employ them? Photojournalist Stanley Greene warns that altered images take the industry "down a dark road. . .We are the messengers, we are the seekers of the truths, we must be the ones that show the light in the darkest corners of the world. When viewers can no longer trust the picture or the photographer taking it, we are nothing but tricksters" (in **Alexander, 2014**).

What do you think? Did you see any of these images? Did you know they had been altered? If you did, would that have changed your interpretation of the stories they represented? Does the fact that major media outlets sometimes alter the images they present to you lead you to question their overall integrity? Do you believe that media outlets that use altered images have an obligation to inform readers and viewers of their decision to restructure reality? How does it feel to know that almost all of the images that we see in our daily newspapers and newsmagazines today are altered in some way?



MEDIA LITERACY CHALLENGE

Identifying Digital Alteration

Media-literate magazine readers are *critical thinkers who make independent judgments about content.* They *think critically about media messages,* and they *have heightened expectations of the content they read.* You'll have to use all these skills to complete this challenge.

In print or online, choose your favorite magazine and find all the content, both editorial and advertising, that shows images of people. Identify the images that appear to have been digitally enhanced or changed. Critics and proponents alike acknowledge that just about every image appearing in a consumer magazine has been altered. How many did you find? What were your clues? How do you feel about the practice, and do you think the magazine had the right to make these alterations? What do your answers say about your understanding and respect for the power of media messages, your expectations of magazine content, and your ability to think critically about the messages in magazines?

You may want to meet this challenge individually, using your favorite publication, or make it a competition. You can have different people examining the same magazine to see who can find the greatest number of alterations, or you can have teams compete against one another looking at an array of titles.

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Cultural Forum Blue Column icon, Media Literacy Red Torch Icon, Using Media Green Gear icon, Developing Media book in starburst icon: ©McGraw Hill

Journalism—Chapter 6

About This Chapter

Journalism is an incredibly important aspect of modern media, and it's difficult for any single chapter of any book to do it justice. You'll find references to journalism throughout this textbook. However, it is important for you to understand some theoretical (but nevertheless vitally important) issues about journalism. That is the purpose of this chapter: to explain how we define news and journalism (and why), to describe the relationship between journalism and democracy, and to explore the difficult question of media bias.

WHAT TO FOCUS ON

Pay attention to the major ideas in this chapter—not just the formal definitions, but also the arguments and ideas here. Some of these concepts are among the most important and relevant you'll learn this semester.

Key Terms in Journalism

Definition of News

As you've hopefully already figured out based on the introductions to some of the previous chapters, the more important a word is—the more fundamental it is to our culture or to a particular area of that culture—the harder it usually is to define. The study of journalism and news-making is no exception to that rule. While there are interesting debates about the meanings of many different words relating to journalism, there is probably no more difficult word in this area to define than "news." Our difficulty defining "news" has to do with how we use the word, how definitions themselves function, and how different people think about what should count as news.



▼ Blurred view of the interior of a live news television broadcast studio control room

eakkachai halang/Shutterstock

Many definitions of news are strikingly basic. For example, media professor C. W. Anderson argues in the provocatively titled *The News Media: What Everyone Needs to Know* that "It is news if it informs us—even with only a snippet of information or a single image—about something noteworthy, interesting, or relevant."[1] In other words, the argument goes, news is whatever gives us more information about the world. At some level, this is certainly true, and that definition reflects the historical origins of the word. The problem with that definition, however, is that it is incredibly broad. It describes both an

article written in a respected newspaper and a five-year-old child wandering up to you and letting you know that her favorite animal is a cat. Assuming you didn't already know the child's favorite animal, both the article and the verbal interaction give you new information. But is it really helpful to group those two kinds of information transferal together?

Part of the problem is how we use the word "news." In casual conversation we might use it to describe any information we consider surprising, using phrases like "you don't eat pizza anymore? That's news to me." We might also use "news" to describe informal reports on the world given to us by friends or acquaintances. "What's the news on your job? Have they promoted you yet?" When we talk about news as a particular kind of information, though, we're usually referring to news journalism, so we talk about reading or watching or hearing "the news."

Let's assume, then, that we want the word "news" to reference news journalism, and not just information given to you by random kids or your buddy from accounting. We still run into the problem of how definitions themselves function. When we sit down and try to write out definitions of words—especially words that have to do with something important—we are often tempted to see the definition as an opportunity to make arguments about what *ought to be true*. Many definitions of "news" are really explanations of what the author of the definitions thinks news should be like. That includes definitions that reference what audiences like to read, watch, and listen to, since that's a way of saying that we ought to see news as what audiences enjoy. Those kinds of definitions can be interesting, but they're not really useful when we're trying to understand news as a category.

We will be taking a different approach to the definition of news. Instead of talking about what ought to be true—or even what the word "really" means—we're going to use a definition that is admittedly somewhat narrow. This is because one of the best ways to decide on a definition is to choose one that helps us in some way. In the case of news, we want a definition that helps us distinguish among the different kinds of information that come to us, and that helps us focus in on the industry of news journalism.

The definition of **news** we will be using is the process of selecting, gathering, filtering, and evaluating information and making narrative reports which are edited by members of news organizations before being distributed for widespread consumption. This is a fairly complicated definition, so let's focus in on the important parts of it. First, news is a *process*, not just an outcome. News refers to all the steps that lead from the initial event to the final distribution of a report. This is important because it helps underline the fact that many different things must happen before we get a final product to consume. Second, news isn't just about collecting information, it's about selecting topics to cover, gathering information in various ways, then filtering and evaluating that information. Much of what influences what we have access to in the form of news happens before reporters even start doing their jobs, when news organizations determine what kinds of events and topics should and should not be covered. Third, news comes in the form of narrative reports. That might be surprising if you think of stories as necessarily fictional. Narratives, however, are crucial to creating meaning, providing context, and explaining things to readers.

Fourth, news is edited by one or more members of a news organization. This distinguishes news from things like self-published blogs that never go through an editorial process. This is not to say that reports that don't get edited for news aren't important. They are just not what we're focusing on here. Furthermore, what counts as a "news organization" has changed significantly, as we'll talk about at the end of the section on defining journalism. Fifth, news has a public component, in that it is distributed

for a large audience. If a small business, for example, were to hire a professional reporter to gather information and make reports about something related to that business, the resulting reports wouldn't be news if they were only distributed to the twenty people in the business. When we talk about news, we are talking about something that is meant for a large audience—even if that audience is not composed of everyone in the world. The point is that we do different things when gathering information we know will be distributed to a very small number of people.

So, news involves a process, it requires multiple kinds of operations, it comes in the form of narrative reports, it is edited by news professionals, and it is distributed for a relatively broad audience. If any of those things is missing, we're not talking about news, at least not for our purposes. In case you're wondering why all this discussion of definitions and how they work is necessary, here's a spoiler: we're going to be talking in future chapters about other difficult words. Try to contain your excitement.

Definition of Journalism

The definitions of "news" and "journalism" are strongly related, at least as we're using them in this book. If you're worried that means that "journalism" will be just as hard to define as "news," then you're wrong. It's going to be a lot harder. Sorry. I'm so sorry. It's not my fault, really. The world is a complicated place.

One of the most basic issues with defining journalism involves the fact that journalism is both a concept and a profession. For many years, journalism was simply defined as "what journalists do."[2] But is that necessarily the case? Journalism itself didn't arise as a professional term until the latter half of the 1800s, when technological and political changes contributed to the rise of popular newspapers.[3] As newspapers became commonplace (and hugely profitable), people who worked at those papers began to think of themselves as belonging to a separate category of worker. They were special, they argued, because the work they did was especially important to the wellbeing of the societies they served, and newspaper owners were happy to support this argument. After all, if journalists were important, then so were the organizations that employed them. Those organizations were afforded special rights, special support, and special protections. So, for many years the word "journalism" became closely tied to the companies that employed journalists. When scholars defined journalism, they tended to assume it was something that only happened within the confines of newspapers, magazines, and—as technology progressed—radio and television newsrooms. When professional journalism schools emerged, they focused on teaching future journalists to work for these organizations, following the principles developed by the professional journalists and editors who worked there.

Times have changed. In the early days of journalism, the major barrier to participation in the profession was access to publication. Printing presses were comparatively rare, printing was an expensive enterprise, and it took huge networks of vendors to distribute printed publications to a national or global audience. The development of radio and television as primary mediums for news only made access to publication more difficult. Broadcast stations are even more expensive than presses, and ownership of recording and broadcasting equipment was concentrated in the hands of a small number of owners. With the spread of the Internet and other, associated technologies, however, "journalism worldwide is in a process of becoming a different kind of industry: less reliant on legacy

news organizations, producing a great variety of contents and services, published across multiple platforms by practitioners in all kinds of formal and informal ways."[4]

While much of the news is still being reported by people who work for large news organizations, journalism "increasingly takes place and shape. . . at the edges and outside of traditional institutions, in new organizational settings, and also in alternative places inside of legacy media."[5] Think about the number of news stories you see these days that begin with information gathered by people who aren't professional journalists. Regular people are recording important events with their smart phones and publishing them online. News sources and witnesses are posting their own words in various social media instead of waiting for reporters to interview them. Politicians release comments directly to the public every day. Even professional journalists are making and distributing content outside the normal channels and processes of the newsroom. And if it's true that journalism is now being done by people who wouldn't have been considered journalists a few decades ago, then perhaps the definition of journalism can be separated from its profession. Scholars have begun thinking of journalism as a set of practices or ideals, rather than something that happens only in a series of privileged organizations.



Waist-up, selective focus, profile view of a Black, female politician talking to male journalist with a cameraman and giving an interview during an international summit

FrameStockFootag

For the purposes of this book, then we'll define **journalism** as "the activities involved in an independent pursuit of accurate information about current or recent events and its original presentation for public edification."[6] As with "news," it's worth talking about each element of our definition of journalism. First, journalism is a series of activities. It's about what you do, not necessarily who you work for. And it's possible for someone to do journalistic things without being a full-time professional journalist. Second, journalism is characterized by independence. That means that journalistic activities are not carried out in service to corporate or political interests, but with the goal of finding the truth. Third journalisms is a pursuit of truth (or accuracy). This distinguishes journalism from fake news, political propaganda, and so on. Fourth, journalism is about current or recent events. "Current or recent" can mean a lot of things, however. Journalism can, of course, contain a considerable amount of historical context. But journalism is not history. Whatever context exists in journalistic publications or broadcasts is there to serve the goal of reporting about something that is happening now or that has happened recently. Fifth, journalism is about presenting original information. This means that

journalism isn't just reposting things other people have written or produced. It involves creating original content for distribution. Finally, journalism is about public edification. Like news, journalism is generated for a mass audience—and journalism isn't just intended to reach a lot of people, it's intended to benefit its audience by providing them with accurate, important information.

Before we move on, it's important to stop for a moment and reflect on the definition of "news." Part of what differentiates news from other kinds of information is that it is edited by people in news organizations. However, the definition of journalism that we just outlined calls into question the importance of traditional news organizations like NBC, major newspapers, wire services, and so on. For something to be news, does it have to be edited by one of these big companies? The answer is no. News is distinguished from casual information or raw data, in part, by the requirement that it goes through an editorial process of some kind. But the transformation of journalism we've just talked about should make it clear than both newsgathering and news-editing is currently happening in a lot of contexts. Small organizations are producing news, and even individual journalists are making news by sharing the burden of editing with other, like-minded journalists. News needs to be edited, but that process can take many different forms.

Journalism and Democracy

The relationship between democracy and journalism in the U.S. has a complex history. It is no accident that the freedom of press is guaranteed in the First Amendment to the Constitution. As early as 1776, the newly formed states that would go on to unite as a republic were guaranteeing the right to a free press to their citizens. We will discuss the long and contentious relationship between the federal government and the press in a later chapter, but it's important to understand from the outset that the constitutionally guaranteed freedom of the press has not always prevented the government from attempting to limit what journalists are allowed to do and (more importantly) what they are allowed to publish.

Both the national devotion to a free press and the government's periodic efforts to restrict the activities of that press can be traced back to the central importance of journalism in our democracy. As famed sociologist Herbert Gans noted, "The country's democracy may belong directly or indirectly to its citizens, but the democratic process can only be truly meaningful if these citizens are informed. Journalism's job is to inform them."[7] That was certainly true at the nation's founding when the country was made up of a few former colonies separated from the federal government by vast distances and poor channels of communication, and it is even more true now that both the country and the government have grown in size and complexity. The press is so important to the functioning of government that it is sometimes referred to as **the fourth estate**—a term that is often misunderstood. The origins of this phrase go back to the medieval European notion that there were three sources of political power: the clergy, the nobility, and the commoners. These were known as the three estates. In the late 1800s, the term "fourth estate" came to be associated with the press, referencing the fact that journalists are politically influential even though they don't play a formal role in the government.

The vital nature of journalism goes well beyond a simple one-way transmission of information. Politicians, the public, and journalists are linked together in an intricate, multidirectional relationship that often requires the press to take an adversarial stance when dealing with government representatives:



▲ Washington, United States of America. 15 October, 2021. Presidential Press Secretary Jen Psaki answers reporters questions in the James Brady Briefing Room at the White House October 13, 2021 in Washington, D.C. Credit: Adam Schultz/White House Photo/Alamy Live News Date Taken : 20211015

Adam Schultz/White House Photo/ Alamy Live News

> Because of Americans' lack of direct experience with the policy process, media serve a vital role by providing political information. Most Americans do not converse with their senator or representative, or with the president. As a result, journalists are expected to serve as surrogates for the public, asking tough questions of political officials, the answers to which the public needs in order to be educated about government. Political leaders utilize media to communicate the promised benefits of their policy proposals to the public, and to convey the perceived drawbacks of their political enemies' proposals.[8]

The news media is so central to the functioning of our democracy that it is nearly impossible to separate the two. Journalists not only communicate ideas about political issues to citizens, the press is also the primary forum where national and state-level politics happen. Policy and social debates occur through the press and via Internet forums, and most citizens only see politicians—both those already in office and those who are still candidates—in media reports. While important aspects of politics still take place in person, the sheer scope and reach of modern media means that "Any study of democracy in contemporary conditions is. . . also a study of how the media report and interpret political events and issues."[9]

The fact that the news media has always been considered an absolutely necessary element of our democracy doesn't mean that everything journalists do is necessarily good for the country. Sometimes the press does a bad job of informing citizens, and journalists can influence society in negative ways that are not directly related to their role as information providers to the democracy. Many journalists, scholars, and commentators are concerned that modern journalism is not doing a good job fulfilling its democratic roles. Does the press focus on the right things? Is it reporting the news in a way that empowers citizens to more fully participate in our democracy? Do journalists adequately reflect and represent the broader society in whose name they are supposed to be acting, and does that matter? Are

the members of the press pursuing their own political or economic agendas at the expense of the public? These are all questions that are important to ask, and the answers are not always encouraging.

What Makes Something Newsworthy

What Does "Newsworthy" Mean, Anyway?

How does information become news? We answered that question from a theoretical perspective at the beginning of this chapter, but there's a difference between what the word "news" means in general and the details of how news organizations and individual journalists select which narratives to produce and distribute. If you're working for a major newspaper, how do you pick which stories to cover? The answer to this question is that you're usually given specific stories to cover by your boss. Of course, that begs the question of how your boss knows what to assign you. If you're a free-lance journalist or someone else who isn't working in a traditional news room, how do you decide what's worth writing (or talking) about? The answer to this question is usually that you look for stories you think will be popular with potential publishers or with the public as a whole. Again, though, this begs the question of how you as a journalist know what will be popular. Regardless of where they originate, how are news stories selected?

Scholars have been studying how news gets made for a long time, so we have a fairly good idea what factors most commonly go into the decision of which news stories to pursue. Before we talk about that, however, it's important to note that when we talk about what makes something newsworthy, we're talking about two fundamentally different things. The first definition of **newsworthiness** is the factors that make a news story theoretically worth publishing. The second definition of **newsworthiness** is the factors that news publishers actually use when determining what stories to publish. This distinction is important for two reasons. First, news content creators don't always follow their own standards when deciding what stories to publish. Second, it's vital to remember that news organizations have the ultimate say in what stories they decide to pursue. In other words, even if a particular news organization has used the same group of factors for one hundred years to determine what they publish, they can still change those factors. There are no rules when it comes to newsworthiness—there are no police in this country who come and arrest journalists if they write about something they haven't ever covered before. Every newspaper or magazine starts out as a blank page, and every broadcast starts out as silence. We *choose* how to fill the space we give to the news. Just because a certain factor has traditionally been used to determine newsworthiness doesn't mean that has to continue being the case. Individual journalists and (especially) news organizations can change their practices any time they want to.

The 12 Factors of Newsworthiness

In 1922, journalist and media critic Walter Lippman pointed out that newspapers are not assembled through the use of "objective standards," but rather through what he called "conventions."[10] In the intervening century, a dizzying array of research has focused on trying to determine what those conventions are. Different scholars have produced slightly different lists of the factors journalists and editors use to determine what to consider "news," but there is a great deal of overlap in their results over time. We will discuss **twelve factors** that journalists and editors tend to use to filter the information they receive, to prioritize some stories over others, and to determine what is **newsworthy**.

Remember that the purpose of this list is not to suggest what *should be* news. Rather, we are describing through careful research what kinds of stories *actually get chosen* for creation and publication as "news."

The first factor that tends to cause stories to be seen as news is **timeliness**. This means how recent an event is. News organizations favor stories that happened in the very recent past, and they prioritize stories that are still happening. All of us have been witness to journalists, web sites, and on-air personalities talking about "breaking news." The excitement we hear in the voices of broadcast journalists when announcing breaking news demonstrates just how important timeliness is to them. Furthermore, news organizations of all kinds have discovered that we as consumers love breaking news. There is a strong incentive for journalists and editors to describe things as breaking news even when they are not, in fact, actually breaking. The down side of the focus on timeliness is twofold. Stories that are not quite as recent tend to get deprioritized, and news organizations in general tend to be fickle, moving from a strong focus on one story to an obsession with something new without always thinking clearly about which stories are really the most important. This means that even very important stories tend to receive only shallow coverage, since there is always something new to distract news organizations from a deeper and more sustained consideration of a given issue.



▼ Television news broadcast with Asian-American anchor-woman and lower thirds on the screen

Kenny/Shutterstock

The second factor of newsworthiness is **proximity**, which means how close events are to a news organization and its readers. We know that news organizations like to target their audience by covering things that are happening nearby. This is certainly true for more locally-focused news organizations like city papers and local television news broadcasts, but it's also true for national news sources. What counts as "close" can be different for a local source of news than it is for publications with a national audience, but in both cases the principle of timeliness is the same. A newspaper in Atlanta will tend to cover stories that take place either in or near the city, while a national paper like *USA Today* or *The New York Times* will tend to cover things that happen in the United States. As with timeliness, proximity can be manipulated by journalists. You'll notice that many news stories about far away events tend to be framed in more local terms. An American news broadcast, for example, might cover a natural disaster in a far-away country by talking about how many Americans were hurt or affected by

those events. This happens because news organizations want to attract the attention of their audience, who they think are most interested by stories that seem proximate to their lives in some way. Unfortunately, as a result, many important news stories that happen far away are neglected or deprioritized.



The third factor is **negativity**. This means stories that contain conflict or other kinds of bad news tend to be favored over those that feature harmony and good news. The shorthand for this phenomenon in journalism is "if it bleeds, it leads." This accounts for the popularity of crime reporting, as well as coverage of international conflict. Interpersonal conflict also tends to take center stage in any sort of news reporting, so political campaigns are often framed as fights between individual politicians instead of competitions between alternative policy choices. Strangely, audiences also seem attracted to bad news more than they are good news. This is true both in terms of which stories prompt consumers to read them and (especially) in terms of which stories are more likely to be shared online. The obvious problem with this tendency is that journalists are incentivized to cover conflict and negativity, and to deprioritize positive stories.

The fourth factor is **prominence**. This means stories that involve people, organizations, or countries that the audience perceives as having high status. If you wonder why news about celebrities is so common, this factor is the answer. News organizations believe their audiences will be more attracted to stories if they involve famous people. This not only means that we get a lot of celebrity news, it also means that news stories tend to focus on the most famous people involved in a given issue. Political stories talk about the actions or words of the president, congresspeople, and high-profile members of the government. Business stories feature prominent CEOs. International journalism focuses on the most well-known countries. This ensures we are well informed about the famous, but it tends to overlook the importance of less prominent people and it tends to exclude the perspectives of the less powerful.

The fifth factor is **importance**. This refers to the actual impact a news story might have on the lives of readers—or on the lives of people in general. You might think this is a reference to big stories about war, but the best example of this sort of news is probably the local weather report. If you've ever watched local news on television, you can see this in action. The news usually leads with the weather, and many stations divide their weather report up into pieces and then release them slowly over the course of the newscast so their viewers will keep watching. Consumers care about the weather report because it's the one aspect of the news they can be absolutely sure will impact their day. Importance also results in stories about the local (and national) economy, coverage of environmental issues, and so on.

The six factor is **unexpectedness**. Stories that contain unexpected elements or have unexpected outcomes are more likely to get covered than those who don't. Unexpected stories might focus on people who are unusual, or who are not normally the subject of news reports. They might also be unexpected in terms of the details of the story itself. The classic term for this kind of journalism is "man bites dog," which is just meant to imply a kind of story that violates our expectations. I don't think there was ever actually an outbreak of people biting dogs at any point in modern history. Though this was one of the first aspects of newsworthiness ever identified, it is also one of the most relevant to today's journalism. We know that unexpected stories are some of the most likely to get shared by people on social media. After all, how many times have we all seen stories on the Internet that try to entice us by showing us the beginning of a story and then insisting that if we click on the link we'll "*never believe what happened next*!" Of course, sadly, most of the time those stories turn out to be entirely believable or even boring. But we all want a surprise, and it is that fact that prompts journalists and editors to seek out unexpected stories.

The seventh factor is **human drama**. This means stories that either show the individual, human face of a larger issue or stories that can be easily framed in very dramatic terms.

This can take the form of "human interest" stories, but it also includes any kind of reporting that features dramatic narratives characterized by tension, mystery, intense emotion, exciting action, and so on. A fondness for drama is one of the most common characteristics of the human experience, so journalists are encouraged to seek out dramatic stories and to frame otherwise common news in dramatic terms. Stories that feature human drama can help us understand the impact of events on regular people, and they can help encourage us to care about people whose lives are very different from our own. On the other hand, a focus on drama can cause journalists to frame some news in ways that misrepresent both actual events and the people involved. We can overlook the sometimes tedious reality of important news stories because we'd prefer a good drama.

The eighth factor is **audio-visual appeal**. Events are more likely to be covered as news if we have access to compelling pictures, audio, and video relating to them. Journalists and media critics alike have been aware of the importance of audio-visual appeal since the rise of photojournalism in the mid-1800s. As television news became more popular, scholars noted that events which were accessible to camera crews were much more likely to end up featured on television news broadcasts. Now that we live in a world where roughly 50% of the global population owns a smartphone,[11] the preference for news stories that have captivating audio-visual accompaniments is even greater. The popularity of smart phones means that we increasingly expect content of all kinds to be visually compelling, but it also means that a staggering number of regular citizens are carrying high-quality video cameras with them at almost all times. Any given event is more likely than ever before to be recorded by one or more

witnesses, and the world is increasingly being monitored by passive video systems such as doorbell and traffic cameras. We are more likely than ever to be able to see and hear the reality of events which were previously left to our imaginations to experience. This can be an important tool for journalists who want to add detail and immediacy to their story, but it also means that news organizations (and audiences) often ignore stories that don't have a strong audio-visual component.

The ninth factor is **brevity**. Journalists have always had to work within the constraints of the space available for their work. Newspapers began as very expensive, cutting-edge media technology, so every line of text was precious. Magazines popularized long form reporting, but even they put a premium on stories that could be told comparatively quickly. Radio and television gave reporters very little time to tell their stories, as broadcast time for news had to be paid for with time spent on advertising. What about now? It seems logical that today's news media world, where the Internet makes it possible for news sites to contain almost infinite space, would reduce the need for brevity. In fact, much the opposite is true. Online distribution makes it possible for journalists to write very long articles, but they are still constrained by the amount of attention modern audiences are willing to give any individual written news story. Furthermore, there is a new incentive for news organizations to be able to summarize reports into headlines that are not only short but also catchy. While formats such as news podcasts afford journalists spaces where they can tell stories at great length, there are also social media sites like Twitter where every post must fit within very narrow ranges of allowable text. The pressure to edit their work arguably makes journalists better writers, but the imperative to produce short news reports can cause news organizations to favor coverage that is simplistic, and to avoid subjects that are more complicated.

The first nine factors of newsworthiness involve characteristics of particular events or stories. They are all reasons a journalist or editor would pay attention to one story or another based on what the story is about, where it takes place, when it takes place, and so on. The final three factors have to do with how news gatherers themselves relate to the events of the world. In other words, these aspects of newsworthiness are less about the nature of an event or a story and more about the relationship a journalist or a news organization has with that story. The tenth factor of newsworthiness is **exclusivity**. News organizations are more likely to cover certain stories when they are the only ones who have access to the story. The news industry has always been focused on **scoops**, or stories that an organization has managed to discover and report before its competition. In the past, a good scoop could allow a newspaper or a television news show to have several days of exclusive coverage while other news organizations raced to catch up. However, the immediacy of the Internet and the ability of reporters to track down and interview sources in very short periods of time has meant that exclusivity doesn't last nearly as long as it used to. Ironically, exclusivity is now even more valuable, causing journalists to feel immense pressure not only to discover stories first, but to publish those stories before anyone else. This has led to a decline in standards for journalistic quality, as reporters are incentivized to publish their reports before they can be verified or fact-checked. Truly exclusive journalism now mostly results from exclusive access to newsmakers, either in the form of interviews with hard-to-reach sources or in the form of information given to individual reporters by those with whom they have developed close relationships. We will talk about this "access journalism" in the next section of the chapter.



▲ Selective-focus view of paparazzi taking pictures of a presumed celebrity

Paul Bradbury/Getty Images

The eleventh factor is strongly related to exclusivity: the **pack mentality**. This term references the tendency of news organizations to cover certain stories because other, competing outlets are already reporting about them. There is a well-documented propensity for news organizations to assume that certain stories are worth covering because their competition has decided to cover them. Furthermore, if a competitor's stories are getting a lot of attention in the form of online views, it makes a certain economic sense for editors to try to replicate that success by instructing their own journalists to cover the same stories. The pack mentality of the press has created many situations where the sudden, widespread obsession with particular stories doesn't seem justified by any of the traditional factors of newsworthiness. Why do certain crime stories become part of the national conversation, for example, while other, very similar stories go entirely uncovered? Often, the answer is that one reporter decided to cover one crime, and the resulting attention paid to the story caused dozens of other reporters to do likewise. The same thing can happen with journalism about any topic. Social media has arguably made the pack dynamic worse, as reporters have begun to treat every online outburst by a famous person as a scoop to be documented and pushed out to their readers as soon as possible.[12] The minute one such outburst gets covered by a reporter, dozens of other journalists follow suit, creating a rush of coverage on multiple platforms. Celebrities and politicians alike have recognized this, and are prone to post outrageous things in order to generate intense publicity for themselves. A final aspect of the pack mentality is that news organizations are more likely to cover stories that they themselves have already covered in the past. Once an organization has reported on a story, they are much more likely to run additional stories about that same issue or event in the future.



▼ Black female tennis star Serena Williams giving an interview at a NYC fashion show

© *Lars A. Niki*

The twelfth and final factor of newsworthiness is **agenda**. Individual news organizations are more likely to cover certain stories if those stories fit in with the agenda of that organization. The next section of this chapter discusses the question of media bias in great depth, and at the risk of posting spoilers, it turns out that the news media in general is not politically biased– at least, not in the ways that we typically imagine it is. Individual news organizations, on the other hand, sometimes have specific biases or agendas. And those agendas influence not only which stories they cover but how they cover

them. Some agendas are political in nature. Fox News is well known for its conservative political agenda, for example, and *The Nation* advertises itself as a bastion of liberal reporting. But not all agendas are political in nature. Some news organizations have an agenda because it is their mission to cover specific types of news. *Sports Illustrated* is more likely to cover sports stories than, say, *Forbes*, while *The National Inquirer* is more likely to talk about celebrity marriages than *The National Review*. Some news organizations reflect the agendas of their owners, while others have agendas that cater to the worldviews of their advertisers. Some organizations are very concerned with publishing stories that make them seem like serious journalistic enterprises, while others might favor more light-hearted or even satirical reports.

What's the Point of Knowing This?

You may very well be asking yourself "what's the point of knowing how news gets selected if I'm not planning to work in the news industry?" Understanding what makes things news-worthy gives you a tool that you, as someone who will inevitably consume news over the course of your life, can use to help better understand the news and how it relates to the larger world. You can use this tool in several ways. First, understanding newsworthiness helps you appreciate that what we normally call "the news" is not the entirety of important information in the world. The news media has tendencies that often exclude or deprioritize certain events, sources, issues, and places. If you want to understand the world (or even a single issue) more fully, you'll need to seek out sources and organizations that go beyond what you can learn from "the news." This can include academic research, alternative news sources, first-hand reports from individuals involved in various issues, and information provided by think tanks and nonprofit organizations, among other sources. Second, understanding newsworthiness can help you read and comprehend the news. You can look for the factors explained above and identify how they are influencing the reports you're encountering. This makes it easier to evaluate the information you're being presented with by the various organizations in the news industry. Remember that you live in a world where it is easier than it has ever been to seek out alternative viewpoints. If a news report is excessively focused on one element of newsworthiness, it's easy for you to find reports that approach the same issue from a different perspective. Third, understanding newsworthiness can help you determine how much trust to put in news stories. It's important to understand that we're not talking about the difference between fake news and real news. We'll talk about that in **Chapter 14**. Instead, newsworthiness is useful for determining how to view the real news you're consuming. Is this coverage part of a news organization's agenda? Is it the result of a pack mentality? Is it representative of a preference for negativity? Is its importance being misrepresented because of its timeliness or its proximity? Being able to answer these questions can help you decide how to react to news, and how to prioritize the many events being covered in the press.

The factors news organizations use to determine newsworthiness ultimately create a certain form of bias. But this isn't necessarily a bad thing—at least, not all the time. There are good reasons for having certain biases. When it comes to what you eat, you're probably biased against nuclear waste or rat poison. There are good arguments in favor of journalists favoring things like timeliness and proximity. Those biases keep us informed about current events and local things that might impact our lives directly. Even something like the journalistic pack mentality isn't always bad. It ensures that multiple different organizations are focused on certain stories, meaning that consumers are more likely to have access to varying perspectives. Of course, even the best kinds of journalistic biases can also cause

problems. As a consumer of media, it's up to you to decide when these factors are helpful, when they might be unwarranted, and when they are creating barriers to useful or truthful information. But you can't make those sorts of decisions unless you're aware how newsworthiness functions in the first place.

Focus on Critical Thinking: Everyone Knows the News Media is Biased, Right

As the chapter on newspapers revealed, "the news" in the United States did not always mean impartial or professional journalism. In fact, many early newspapers were formally affiliated with political parties. Later, as newspapers grew in popularity, the focus of owners and editors was less on factual reporting and more on generating content that would please the public and grow the size of their audiences. It is sometimes said that objective journalism began in 1896 when **Adolph Ochs** purchased *The New York Times* and began transforming it into what is now seen as a model for a modern newspaper. It's easy to see why this story is persuasive to so many people. In 1901, Ochs published an editorial in which he cited "the strict impartiality with which the news is treated" and the "earnest effort [The Times] made to give perfect fairness to each party in any political contest"[13] as policies that distinguished his paper from others. However, researchers have meticulously documented the development of the idea of objective journalism in American history, and the story about Ochs and the *Times* no longer represents the best available information. Media scholar Steven Maras writes that the idea of objectivity in journalism "has emerged in a number of different ways and at different times, varying according to different professional, technological, commercial, political and organizational conditions."[14] He traces the history of objective journalism back to the 1830s, and argues that it was "not fully articulated as an ideal until the 1920s."[15] So, while *The New York Times* was important in the popularization of objective journalism, it was not the origin of the idea.

The idea of objective journalism is one of the most broadly misunderstood concepts in the study of the press. People understandably often confuse objective journalism with more philosophical understandings of the word "objectivity," so they think that objective journalism means the press is supposed to say only things that are "objectively" true. Anyone who has ever studied this aspect of philosophy for more than five minutes knows what an enormously difficult thing it is to determine whether anything is (or even could be) objectively true. Fortunately for those of us who would rather avoid that kind of philosophical debate, that's not what objective journalism is about. **Objective journalism** is a way of approaching journalism that highlights the importance of separating facts from opinion, presenting an emotionally detached view of the news, and striving for fairness and balance. As Steven Maras notes, a simpler way of saying this is that objective journalism is a form of journalism committed to specific values, processes, and language.[16] It values fairness, a commitment to facts, and a presentation of the news without bias. Its processes include many things we have come to associate with journalistic professionalism, including using supporting evidence, attributing quotes carefully and accurately, requiring confirmation of key elements of a story from multiple sources, fact-checking, and presenting stories in a specific format that readers recognize as "news." The language of objective journalism rejects hyperbole and emotional terminology, and tends to involve a simple, direct style of communication that gives readers a sense of confidence in the reporter's trustworthiness.

THE DECLINE OF OBJECTIVITY

Many critics have bemoaned what they call the decline of objective journalism, but their complaints reflect a much more complicated situation. There are still, of course, many journalists who are committed to the values, processes, and language of objective journalism. What we often call the death

of objectivity in journalism is really three separate but interrelated developments in the press. First, we have witnessed an unprecedented expansion in the number of sources of journalism, both in terms of traditional media and in terms of the number and type of people "reporting" the news. The arrival of CNN in 1980 heralded the beginning of the 24-hour news cycle and the end of the era when "news" was the exclusive province of newspapers, magazines, and the three broadcast networks. The dramatic expansion of the number of news outlets that came with the rise of cable television, however, was nothing compared to the explosion of news sources that occurred as the Internet gained popularity in the 1990s and 2000s. Not only did the Internet make it possible for news organizations rise to prominence in a very short period of time and at a fraction of the previous price, the interconnectedness of the digital world meant that virtually anyone could become a nationally or even internationally known source of news and commentary. Information gathering and dissemination—once the province of a very exclusive group of institutional reporters—became something that was increasingly being done by people with no journalistic training and no affiliation with traditional news organizations. Unsurprisingly, these new entrants into the field of "news" had less commitment to (and often no knowledge of) the tenets and practices of objective journalism.

Second, at the same time as the number of journalistic outlets has dramatically expanded, the available resources for journalism at traditional news organizations has significantly declined. The number of journalists working in newsrooms in the United States dropped by 26% from 2008 to 2021, with most of those losses in the newspaper industry.[17] While the number of reporters working in digital journalism rose significantly during that period, it wasn't enough to offset the losses at newspapers. As a result, there are now at least 30,000 fewer reporters working in the United States.[18] And it's not just a decline in reporters. Newspapers themselves are rapidly disappearing from the American landscape. Between 2005 and 2020, one-fourth of all the newspapers in America shut down—and that was before the pandemic. At least 30 newspapers either closed or merged in the spring of 2020 alone.[19]

Nor are these losses spread out evenly in the industry. The loss of local reporters has been particularly significant. Half of local reporters disappeared from 2005 to 2020.[20] The number of reporters living in Washington, D.C., in particular, almost doubled from 2004 to 2014.[21] This means that fewer stories get written about anywhere else in the U.S., and the reporters who are left to cover local stories are often overburdened, pressed for time, and unable to give the stories they do cover the full measure of their professional attention. There are indications, for example, that local reporters now increasingly rely on statements from elected officials for their stories, instead of doing the kind of broader investigation that objective journalism values.

Finally, the drive among news organizations to develop and grow their audiences has led to some professional practices that blur the lines between objective journalism, partisanship, and entertainment. It is important to remember that American journalism has always contained elements of both partisanship and entertainment, even at the heights of commitment to objective journalism. After all, the opinion/editorial pages of newspapers have always been some of the popular sections, and the history of comic strips in newspapers (not to mention the coverage of sports, fashion, food, movies, and so on) is ample evidence that even the most serious news organizations also understand the value of more entertainment-oriented content. However, we are now seeing several trends in this area that make it harder for consumers of news to distinguish between fact and opinion—between news and entertainment. First, many news organizations have dramatically increased the percentage of their content devoted to opinion. This trend started when networks like CNN suddenly found themselves in need of twenty-four hours of material every day. Instead of investing significant resources in larger

staffs of journalists, news organizations hired a few pundits and started airing shows featuring dueling (usually politically opposed) opinions. When the Fox News Channel arrived in 1996, its owners hit on the successful tactic of tilting their coverage toward a more conservative audience that largely felt rejected by mainstream news outlets. In 2006, the network soared to the top of the cable news ratings largely on the strength of prime-time shows that favored strongly partisan anchors who interpreted the news of the day for an ideologically motivated audience. Some other news networks followed Fox's lead, and there is now a profusion of popular prime-time news shows that can best be classified as opinion journalism, or even just political commentary. Because the hosts of these shows are often very popular with consumers, the networks will sometimes feature them during regular news coverage of big events like political elections. This makes it very hard for viewers to separate fact from opinion, and it encourages the audience to see partisan commentary as integrated with and indistinguishable from "the news."

The other, related problem is the rise of what is known as **access journalism**—journalism in which reporters trade away some of their objective practices and traditional adversarial stance in exchange for access to the most prominent newsmakers of the day. In essence, journalists agree to treat the targets of their reporting in a relatively friendly manner, and in exchange the newsmakers they deal with agree to give the journalists interviews and other kinds of access to their lives and their insights. Access journalism is a response to a real, serious problem journalists have started to encounter with the rise of the Internet: politicians, business leaders, entertainers, and other newsmakers are no longer dependent on any specific news organization to give them coverage. Where once newsmakers were forced to respect the needs of major newspapers and the three broadcast television networks, prominent individuals can now pick and choose which sources they want to have cover them. They can go so far as to pick the specific journalists they want to interact with, knowing that wherever their chosen reporters publish, the Internet will make their reports accessible to everyone. If a major political leader in the U.S. chooses only to give interviews to one pundit at Fox News, for example, whatever they say will nevertheless get picked up and republished by other television networks, newspapers, magazines, and countless Internet-based news agencies. For reporters, it is very tempting to agree to give newsmakers friendly coverage in exchange for being one of the chosen few to whom important people choose to speak.

This is not necessarily a new phenomenon. Media scholar and journalist Dean Starkman argues that there has been a constant struggle in journalism since the initial popularization of objective journalism in the 1920s. Starkman identifies two competing strains of American journalism—access journalism and what he calls **accountability journalism**, which is also known as investigative or public service journalism. This kind of journalism traces its roots back to the muckrakers, with their daring investigations and their long-form articles in newspapers and magazine. The easiest way to understand the difference between the two strains, Starkman argues, is that "access reporting tells readers what powerful actors *say* while accountability reporting tells readers what they *do*."[22]



A NAUSEATING JOB, BUT IT MUST BE DONE
(President Roosevelt takes hold of the investigating muck-rake himself in the packing-house scandal.)

▲ Cartoon of President Theodore Roosevelt as a muckraker cleaning up the meat scandal. Hand-colored halftone of an illustration

North Wind Picture Archives/Alamy Stock Photo

Another way to understand the distinction is that access journalism is about profiling news-makers, while accountability journalism is about probing their words and actions. While Starkman believes both forms of journalism will always have an important place, only accountability journalism "speaks to, and for, the broader public."[23] It's important to understand that accountability journalism and objective journalism are not the same thing. It's possible for accountability journalists to depart from the values, processes, and language of objective journalism. For example, an investigative reporter might end up presenting arguments that are more devoted to a particular political viewpoint than they are to facts and fairness. Similarly, an objective journalist might end up engaging in access journalism even though their reporting was factual and fair-minded. As we navigate the decline of professional journalism as an industry and the spread of openly partisan reporting, we will increasingly need journalists who are willing to hold the powerful accountable while also pursuing their reporting according to at least some of the tenets of objective journalism.

IS THE NEWS BIASED?

The belief that the news media are biased toward one political perspective or another has become a common feature of American life in the last two decades. Polls indicate that public trust in the news media to report fairly and accurately peaked in 1976 in the wake of the Watergate scandal. That trust slowly declined in the next thirty years, falling below 50% around 2005. Since that year, public trust in the news has never risen past 50%. Trust in the press hit its lowest point in 2016 at 32%, recovered a bit for a few years, and then sank again to around 36% in 2020.[24] Perceptions about the news media are sharply ideologically divided. In a recent poll by the Pew Research Center, more than twice as many Democrats as Republicans trust the information they get from national press. This gap is a very recent phenomenon. Trust among Republicans in the national press declined by 50% from 2016 to 2021.[25] Given the lack of major changes in how the national press operated during that period, scholars are

increasingly convinced that this decline is being driven in large part by the repeated attacks on the press not only by Republican politicians but by conservative-leaning news organizations such as Fox. Professor of Political Science Meredith Conroy puts it succinctly, summarizing various strands of research on this subject "Hostility and distrust of the news media. . . has become a point of political identity among Republicans."[26]

The idea that the news media is biased toward liberal ideas and values has gained broad currency among Republicans since around 1980. Media scholars have responded to this growing concern with a staggering quantity and diversity of research on the subject. Before we explore their work, it's important to begin by noting that anyone who wants to research the question of media bias is confronted with a huge problem: how can you tell if something is biased? What does it mean for journalism to be biased in the first place? What sort of activity by the press would indicate bias? Most experts who study the subject talk about bias as a departure from reality—which is an absolutely lovely definition if we could all agree on what political reality is in the first place. For example, is the fight to constrain budget deficits a conservative idea? For many years, fiscal conservatism meant political conservatism. However, in recent years, the Republican party at the federal level has become less and less concerned about deficit spending. Does that mean fiscal conservatism is no longer a conservative idea, or that it never was one in the first place? If the news media spends a lot of time talking about federal budget deficits, is that a bias toward the left, the right, or neither one? Similarly, the political left in the U.S. is very concerned about climate change, while much of the political right at the national level prefers to minimize those concerns. If the news media talks about climate change, does that mean they are biased against the right or does it mean that they are simply reporting the reality of the consensus view among climate scientists?

The difficulty of answering these questions derives, in part, from what is called **the Overton Window**. Named for the work done by policy analyst Joseph P. Overton, the Overton Window refers to the range of political ideas that the public will find reasonable or acceptable at any given time. The idea is that there is a vast assortment of possible political ideas out there in the world, and that the public in general is only willing to accept a certain range of them at any particular moment. Sometimes the public is willing to accept more conservative ideas, for example, and other times it finds more liberal ideas acceptable. This is not to say that a particular era of time is *only* liberal or conservative, just that the window of what we think of as reasonable changes over time. If you consider any issue, political or otherwise, there is an Overton Window for how the public thinks about that issue. The real genius of the Overton Window, however, is the realization that it is possible to move the window of acceptability by intentionally making arguments that are closer to the extreme end of the political spectrum. The public loves compromise and "meeting in the middle," so if you are able to insert a lot of extreme ideas into the public conversation, then you can drag the public's understanding of what is possible in your direction and therefore change what "the middle" is. For example, if you argue that we should abolish prisons, and if you are successful in getting that argument publicized, then people who like jails find themselves defending against that argument instead of spending time arguing for building more jails. In the public mind, it's easy to see the new reality as being a choice between some prisons and no prisons, instead of some prisons and more prisons. The Overton Window on the prison debate has been moved.

So, if we're studying media bias, how do we know that we're not falling victim to the Overton Window of the times? How do we know that what we see as "reality" hasn't already been profoundly influenced in one direction or the other by extremist argumentation? The answer that many media scholars have

come up with is to investigate the question of bias in many ways and many issues, using many different methodologies. Our difficulty knowing where to start and how to measure when it comes to media bias means that individual studies that focus on a single period of time or issue aren't particularly helpful in answering this question. It's important to look at the media bias research as a whole, or to focus on studies that group together many other studies across time. And when we do that, we are forced to conclude that "the preponderance of evidence finds no overall, systematic bias in the mainstream press toward one side of the political spectrum."[27] In perhaps the most comprehensive study on media bias ever undertaken, communication sciences scholar David D'Alessio meticulously surveyed the election coverage of multiple news organizations from 1948 through 2008. His conclusion was that "the data clearly indicates that the media, on the whole, with the exception of specific individual outlets on either side of the ideological spectrum (that have a strong tendency to offset one another), tend to be neither pro-Republican nor pro-Democrat in their coverage of Presidential election campaigns. On the whole the media are smack dab in the middle."[28]

A reasonable person might wonder if things have changed since 2008. Has the news media recently become more biased? Research consistently refutes this notion. A recent in-depth study of how newspapers cover politics found that although "there is a relationship between a newspaper's ideology and the tone of coverage, the effect is small." After years of painstaking research, the authors conclude that "ideological bias in U.S. newspapers is largely nonexistent."[29] Many people who claim the news has a liberal bias will cite the widespread perception that American journalists tend to be more liberal than the public as a whole. But does that translate into actual journalistic bias? One of the most complex and detailed studies ever undertaken of journalistic behavior concluded that "despite the overwhelming liberal composition of the media, there is no evidence of liberal media bias in the news that political journalists choose to cover."[30] This is a particularly powerful finding, as it demonstrates that even when journalists themselves are politically biased, the work they produce tends not to be. Furthermore, the more sources we seek in our media diet, the less likely we are to be influenced by any particular journalist's viewpoint or any particular news organization's agenda. D'Alessio points out that the news media is composed of multiple, independent actors, so trying to conceive of all those different people and organizations as though they are one thing with an overwhelming political bias is foolish. This diversity of actors even within a single organization, D'Alessio argues, is one reason why the news media tends to end up in the political middle:

> [A]ny generalization about a social structure as complex as the news media industry that is based on a single fact concerning one element of that industry is likely to be untenable. The media have multiple identities, not just one. A news media outlet is not simply a big room with a pack of reporters running about willy-nilly saying whatever pleases their partisan souls, nor is it just a spider's web, an owner sitting in the middle pulling on strands in order to get his or her workers to perform on command. There are checks and balances on each of those actors that moderate their behaviors.[31]

So, we can safely conclude that the news media isn't biased, then, right? Right? You didn't really think it would be that easy, did you?

THIS IS NOT THE BIAS YOU'RE LOOKING FOR

Many experts who study the subject of media bias believe that we are paying attention to the wrong thing. Because the public is so convinced that the media has a bias toward their political opponents, the only thing that gets any coverage is a very narrow slice of the media bias research. However, political scientist Adam Schiffer argues that "the obsession with partisan bias distracts critics and citizens from the more serious failures of political news. While the media aren't literally trying to kill us, they sometimes inflict serious injury on informed citizenship through a litany of routines, biases,

and shortcomings that leave news consumers ill equipped to navigate contemporary politics."[32] We just spent the bulk of this chapter talking about the various ways that the concept of newsworthiness can bias journalists and mislead readers, after all. Furthermore, the news media shows a pronounced bias toward the government. "Journalists look to whichever party is in control of government when deciding which political leaders to cite more often."[33] There has also been a pro-business bias in the news in the last few decades—not because journalists and publishers have conspired to create one, but because both major political parties have adopted pro-business stances, and journalists tend to look to party leaders to determine their own range of what is acceptable.[34]

One of the most well-documented journalistic biases is toward **strategic coverage** of political issues—framing political news in a way that foregrounds the self-interest, public positioning, and strategic decision-making of important politicians instead of focusing on the substance of the news itself. When journalists talk about a new policy being "a political win" for one or more politicians instead of talking about the potential impact of the policy, that's strategic coverage. Similarly, when most of the news around an election focuses on who's ahead, who's behind, and who's gaining or losing ground in the polls—the **horse race** frame of election reporting—that is also an example of strategic coverage. Research indicates that strategic coverage by journalists impacts news consumers negatively, increasing cynicism, decreasing substantive knowledge about important issues, and makes people more negative about the news in general.[35]

There are many forms of bias that journalists suffer from, not because of any political agenda but because of the nature of their jobs and the culture of the country and of journalism as an industry. "Reporters are biased toward conflict because it is more interesting than stories without conflict," the Managing Editor of the Columbia Journalism Review claimed in an influential article about objectivity, "we are biased toward sticking with the pack because it is safe; we are biased toward event-driven coverage because it is easier; we are biased toward existing narratives because they are safe and easy."[36] But perhaps the nonpartisan bias that has received the most attention in the past few years has to do with the idea of objective journalism itself. Too often, critics argue, journalists interpret the imperative of objective journalism to be "fair" as a requirement that news must give equal weight to both sides of any story. This is known as **story-balancing** (or "both-sides-ing"), and has become a hallmark of modern journalism. If you are reporting about a conflict between different political parties, the idea goes, then the easiest way to achieve fairness is to make sure you report the arguments of both parties, and that you give them equal treatment and credence in your article. Similarly, if you are reporting about a conflict between a company and protestors, you give both sides equal coverage. Unfortunately, this approach has several drawbacks. First, it imagines that every conflict is composed of two sides—only two, no more, no less. In fact, most substantive conflicts have many different sides which cannot be simplified into two perspectives. Second, story-balancing tends to overstate conflict and ignore consensus. If one "side" of a conflict makes an argument, for example, journalists often try to balance the story by finding someone from "the other side" who disagrees with that argument. In most cases even opposing sides have substantial areas of agreement, but covering that kind of consensus is not as much of a priority for those seeking journalistic fairness.

Third, story-balancing can make journalists into "passive recipients of news, rather than aggressive analyzers and explainers of it."[37] Because of a desire to achieve fairness and a fear of seeming biased, journalists who try to create balanced stories often find themselves silently listening to powerful newsmakers instead of probing their stories and challenging them when they lie or mislead. When a conflict arises where one side is more expertly represented, journalists may default to

reporting the words of the more powerful side, unwilling to represent the less powerful group in the conflict without a slick and easily accessible spokesperson. Since one of the core requirements of a functional press is to be adversarial, story-balancing can diminish the watchdog function of journalism. Finally, story-balancing can lead to **false equivalence**—treating two arguments, perspectives, or even groups as equally credible and deserving of coverage when they are not. This can take different forms. By including an argument or a person or group in a story, journalists sometimes give the appearance of legitimacy to ideas that are baseless or underserving of public attention. For example, climate scientists have complained for years that journalists have a tendency to include the perspectives of climate change skeptics when they report about the issue. The problem with this is that 97% of actively publishing climate scientists agree that climate change is real and caused by humans. This is a level of consensus much stronger than most of what we find in areas of science we regard as uncontroversial. Most climate change skeptics aren't climate scientists at all, and rely on discredited, politically funded publications. Giving the massive consensus of qualified scientists the same amount of coverage as the unscientific opinions of a few people who aren't trained in the field makes those two perspectives seem equally legitimate when they are not. It is the equivalent of having people from the Flat Earth Society come on to dispute every report about space exploration and satellites. The other form false equivalence takes is the tendency of journalists to attribute equal amounts of culpability to both sides of a dispute, when the evidence strongly suggest that one side is mostly to blame. We see this in reporting about alleged sexual assaults, where journalists often "balance" their stories by mentioning things about the victim's clothing or prior sexual behavior that have nothing to do with the alleged assault. The urge to report that "both sides" are at fault is also very common among political reporters, who seek to insulate themselves from charges of bias by including damaging claims about both political parties, even when their stories are really only about problems on one side of the aisle.

"Bias in the news is important because it speaks to the quality of the informational environment in the United States, and whether Americans are able to form coherent, meaningful opinions regarding the political system."[38] It's easy to understand why so many people are focused on the idea that the news media is biased. If we are concerned about having access to high-quality journalism, however, we would be better served by focusing on the nonpartisan biases found in the press and less obsessed with the idea that the entire news media is out to get our favored political party.

What to Study

KEY WORDS

News

Journalism

Newsworthiness

Timeliness, **proximity**, **negativity**, **prominence**, **importance**, **unexpectedness**, **human drama**, **audio-visual appeal**, **brevity**, **exclusivity**, **pack mentality**, **agenda**

The Fourth Estate

Objective journalism

Access journalism

Accountability journalism

The Overton Window

Strategic coverage

Horse race

Story-balancing

False Equivalence

IMPORTANT PEOPLE

Adolph Ochs

QUESTIONS YOU SHOULD BE ABLE TO ANSWER

- Why do we define news the way we do for this course, and what are the different elements of that definition?
- When did American states begin guaranteeing freedom of the press?
- What is the role of the free press in a democracy?
- How are politicians, the public, and the press linked in our democracy, and why does that often require the press to be adversarial?
- What are the various definitions of newsworthiness? Why do they matter?

- How many factors influence what gets considered newsworthy? What are they and how do they function? How does each factor potentially make journalism better or worse for readers?
- How can understanding the factors of newsworthiness help media consumers?
- What is the best information we have about when the idea of objective journalism began the U.S.? When was it fully articulated?
- What does it mean to say that objective journalism valued a specific set of values, processes, and language? Which values? Which processes? Which language?
- What three developments led to what many people describe as the decline of objectivity in journalism?
- What is the history of public trust in the press? How does party affiliation relate to current attitudes toward the press? Know the relevant statistics.
- Why is it difficult to research media bias?
- What are the implications of the Overton Window for media bias research?
- What does the overall research on media bias tell us about whether the American press is biased in favor of a particular political party? What does it mean to say that the media have multiple identities, and how does that relate to media bias arguments?
- What are the actual biases we have documented in the news media?
- Why is story-balancing problematic, and how does it relate to objective journalism?

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Introduction to Chapter 7

About This Chapter

This chapter deals with the two distinct but deeply connected mediums of radio and recorded sound. Radio, of course, is a broadcast medium, while recorded sound circulates audio through static products like records, tapes, compact disks, and so on. This chapter provides a generally excellent history of both mediums, so there's not as much work for us to do here in this introduction.

WHAT TO FOCUS ON

Focus on the history that is provided in this introduction. Make sure you know the people involved as well as the answer to the question of who invented radio. Know the major elements of the "Short History of Radio and Sound Recording" in the upcoming chapter—radio, sound recording, broadcasting, and regulation. You'll need to know about advertising and networks, the technological advances during World War II, and the impact of television on radio. Focus on "Radio and Its Audiences" as well as the graph and statistics at the very beginning of "Scope and Nature of the Radio Industry." You don't need to pay as much attention to the various subsections of "Scope and Nature of the Radio Industry," but it's good to read those sections anyway just to understand the context of radio as a medium. Focus instead on "Deregulation and Ownership." Pay attention to "Scope and Nature of the Recording Industry," as well as "Rock n' Roll, Radio, and Race Relations." You'll need to know "The Major Recording Companies" and "Trends and Convergence in Radio and Sound Recording." Finally, pay attention to "The Convergence of the Internet and the Recording Industry." This is a big chapter because it's telling the stories of two fundamentally different but interconnected mediums—radio and recorded sound.

Introductory Information About Sound & Radio

Focus on Critical Thinking: Tesla, Marconi, and the Radio Corporation of America

The upcoming chapter does a generally excellent job of reviewing the history of radio as a medium, especially in the United States. However, it breezes past an important chapter in the earliest history of radio. The larger story of that period is instructive not only in terms of the history of radio but also in terms of how we think of invention and innovation.

As previous chapters have already made clear, the late 1800s and early 1900s was a time of great scientific and engineering progress. The industrial revolution was well underway, and the rapid expansion of new technology built upon itself so much that it seemed major innovations were arriving every year. As travel became easier and communication more rapid, the scientific community became more and more interconnected. It was in this context that the radio went from being a scientific curiosity to a major communication medium and an international industry. The upcoming chapter mentions that there remains disagreement over who "invented" radio. That is true, strictly speaking, but it is also a bit misleading. The disagreement involves the meaning of the meaning of word "invented," not who did what and when.

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Interest in radio as a field of study was jump-started in 1886, when German physicist **Heinrich Hertz** became the first person to transmit and receive controlled radio waves. This sparked a sort of global race to explore the properties of radio waves and translate their potential into practical applications. **Nikola Tesla**, a Serbian-born inventor living in America, made substantial advances toward this goal, and by 1895 announced that he was ready to send a radio signal 50 miles. Unfortunately, before he could complete the demonstration, his lab burned to the ground. It took Tesla years to recover from the depression sparked by the incident and to rebuild his laboratory. During that same time, **Guglielmo Marconi**, a young Italian inventor, was making breakthroughs in controlled radio signal transmission and reception. In 1896, he moved to England and began demonstrating his devices for the British government. Meanwhile, in 1897 and 1898, Tesla began proving that he could use radio waves for practical functions by demonstrating a remote-controlled boat he had built. In 1897, Tesla successfully applied for a U.S. patent for a system designed to transmit electricity wirelessly. In 1900, Tesla updated the patent to include more specific methods of radio transmission. Not to be outdone, in 1899 Marconi claimed to have successfully transmitted radio signals across the English Channel—though there was only one other witness (Marconi's assistant), and the signal wasn't strong enough to activate an automatic recorder. Tesla felt that Marconi was just extending on Tesla's own work, which he had made available through lectures as early as 1893.[1] The U.S. Patent Office seemingly agreed, repeatedly turning down Marconi's patent applications in the very early 1900s on the grounds that they relied too much on the work of Tesla and others.[1]

In 1904, however, the Patent Office reversed itself and granted Marconi's patent requests, invalidating Tesla's radio patents. It remains unclear why this decision was made, but at the time it happened Tesla was broke and couldn't afford to litigate the decision adequately. Marconi formed a company to

develop and sell radio devices, and Tesla rapidly lost ground in the fight to be known as the father of radio. What really cemented Marconi's commercial victory, though, was the end of World War I.

THE GREAT AMERICAN RADIO MONOPOLY

It is a massive understatement to say that World War I was a terrible event. It was a war that featured mechanized artillery but infantry that was still primarily using horses and foot transport. Over 15 million people and 8 million horses died in a conflict that was a nightmare of trench warfare, barbed wire, and extensive use of chemical weapons. Military commanders soon learned the high price of the modern fog of war, where troops were often lost or misdirected because of poor communication, and friendly fire incidents were depressingly common. By the ending phases of the war, it became clear that whichever nations developed effective radio technology would have a huge edge in the next global conflict. To that end, in 1917 "the U.S. government seized all patents owned by U.S.-based radio manufacturers. This allowed the military to use the technology for the war effort without being encumbered with pesky and expensive licensing fees."[2] After the war officially ended, the government decided to maintain control of the burgeoning radio industry by backing the formation of the **Radio Corporation of America** (RCA). Though RCA was technically a subsidiary of General Electric, the company operated as a sort of shadow arm of the government. Other companies were forced to sell their radio patents to RCA, including The Marconi Company. RCA was then allowed to operate as a monopoly on all things radio, the idea being that centralizing radio knowledge and production would help spur innovation and result in technological leadership for the United States. The plan was a huge success, but this meant that not only the government but major financial powers were lined up against Tesla and anyone else who wanted to challenge the primacy of Marconi's patents. In fact, the lawsuit that eventually reached the Supreme Court in June of 1943 came as the result of an infringement claim brought against Tesla, who had already died in the first few days of that same year.

SO WHO INVENTED RADIO, AGAIN?

Honestly, it depends on what you mean by "invented." Marconi has gone down in history as the "father of radio," and there is no disputing the significance of his contributions in innovating and refining radio technology. Most importantly, Marconi was the one who pushed radio technology toward a more practical, consumer-friendly model. None of that really means that he invented radio, however, and the problem with asking "who invented radio" is that the question assumes it was a single person. Hertz was the first to send a radio broadcast, but even he was exploring and refining the theoretical work of Scottish physicist James Maxwell. There are also a number of other scientists who can reasonably claim to have had an early hand in the invention of Radio. English physicist **John Fleming** developed the first radio transmitter (which Marconi used in his transatlantic demonstration), and his countryman **Oliver Joseph Lodge** was awarded a radio tuning patent in the United States in 1898. American mathematician **John Stone Stone** (yes, both his middle and last names were "Stone) also acquired radio tuning patents in the United States before Marconi. The primacy of Stone's work was affirmed by the Supreme Court in 1935, when it ruled that some of Marconi's patents were invalid because they were too similar to Stone's prior work. Unfortunately, like Tesla, Stone died before the court ruled in his favor. So, while Marconi might be the father of radio, he didn't invent it. The fairest way to summarize this complicated history is to say that what we know as radio was really invented by a series of talented and ground-breaking scientists, sometimes working together and sometimes competing with each other. In the end, radio was the sum of parts developed by a sort of unknowing

team of scientists separated by geography, time, contrasting beliefs and viewpoints, and differing levels of business acumen.

What to Study

KEY WORDS

Radio Corporation of America

Liquid barretter

Audion tube

Phonautograph

Radio Box Memo

KDKA

1910 Wireless Ship Act

Radio Act of 1912

Radio Act of 1927

Federal Radio Commission

Trustee model

Spectrum Scarcity

The Communications Act of 1934

Federal Communications Commission

WEAF

Broadcast Networks

Affiliates

National Broadcasting Corporation

Columbia Records

Telecommunications Act of 1996

Local Community Radio Act of 2010

Cultural homogenization

IMPORTANT PEOPLE

Heinrich Hertz

Nikola Tesla

Guglielmo Marconi

John Fleming

Oliver Joseph Lodge

John Stone Stone

Reginald Fessenden

Lee DeForest

Edouard-Leon Scott de Martinville

Thomas Edison

Emile Berliner

Joseph P. Maxwell

David Sarnoff

Frank Conrad

Big Mama Thornton

Alan Freed

QUESTIONS YOU SHOULD BE ABLE TO ANSWER

- Who invented radio? What was the relationship between Tesla and Marconi?
- What was the impact of World War I on the development of radio technology?
- What were record and record player sales in 1919?
- What station made the first commercial radio broadcast in the U.S.? When was it, and what was the subject matter of the broadcast?
- What was the growth in the number of radios in U.S. homes from 2021 to 2022?
- What did the sinking of the *Titanic* have to do with radio regulation?
- What crisis was the Radio Act of 1927 a response to? How did the 1927 Act deal with ownership of the airwaves?
- What are the two premises of the trustee model of regulation?
- When did radio advertising begin? What station accepted the first radio commercial, and how long was it?
- Who founded NBC? What is the relationship between NBC and the founding of ABC?

- What impact did the Great Depression have on the recorded music industry? On the radio industry?
- What impact did World War II have on the radio industry? What new sound recording technologies arrived during that time?
- What impact did the arrival of television have on radio's popularity and profitability?
- Today, who are the people who make up radio's audience? What are the trends in overall audience size, time spent listening, and the time spent listening by young people?
- How many Americans listen to the radio in a given week, both in overall numbers and in percentage? How many broadcast radio stations are operating in the US? What percentage of American now listen to radio on digital devices?
- What is special about the radio stations that broadcast on FM frequencies between 88.1 and 91.9 megahertz?
- What was the impact of the Telecommunications Act of 1996 on radio ownership?
- What is the comparison between the amount of music Americans buy annually versus the amount they stream?
- According to the textbook, what was the impact of rock n' roll radio on race relations in the U.S.?
- Who are the 3 major recording companies, and what percentage of the global recorded music market do they control?
- What percentage of all on-demand play time globally is accounted for by YouTube? What percentage of music industry revenues does streaming generate?
- How many Americans listen to at least on podcast per month?

NOTES

1. Cooper, Christopher. *The Truth About Tesla: The Myth of the Lone Genius in the History of Innovation*. Race Point Publishing, 2015, p. 146.
2. Cooper, p. 13.

Radio, Recording, and Popular Music

7



Thirty dollars to download a beat; $20 in studio time; uploaded to TikTok, then a deal with a major label. Lil Nas X's *Old Town Road* was 2019's most consumed song, streamed 2.5 billion times.

Mario Anzuoni/REUTERS/Alamy Stock Photo

1844 Samuel Morse's telegraph
1860 Scott's phonautograph
1876 Alexander Graham Bell's telephone
1877 ▶ Edison patents "talking machine"
1896 Marconi sends wireless signal over 2 miles
1899 Marconi sends wireless signal across the English Channel



Mooziic/Alamy Stock Photo

1900

~1900 Tesla and Marconi file radio patents
1903 ▶ Marconi sends first wireless signal across the Atlantic
1905 Columbia Phonograph Company develops two-sided disc
1906 Fessenden makes first public broadcast of voice and music; DeForest invents audion tube
1910 Wireless Ship Act of 1910
1912 Radio Act of 1912
1916 Sarnoff sends Radio Music Box Memo
1919 Radio Corporation of America formed
1920 KDKA goes on air
1922 First radio commercial


Comstock Images/Alamy Stock Photo

1925

1926 NBC, first radio network
1927 Radio Act; Federal Radio Commission
1934 Communications Act; Federal Communications Commission
1939 Television introduced at World's Fair; FM goes on air
1946 GIs return from Germany with tape recorder
1947 Columbia Records introduces 33⅓ rpm disc
1949 ▶ Development of the DJ


H. ARMSTRONG ROBERTS/ ClassicStock/Alamy Stock Photo

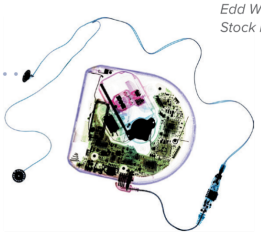
1950

1951 Car radios exceed home sets
Mid-50s Network affiliation halved
1955 ▶ DJ Freed brings R&B to New York
Late-50s National billings drop nearly 80%


Edd Westmacott/Alamy Stock Photo

1975

1983 ▶ CD introduced
1987 MP3 developed
1996 Telecommunications Act


Digital Vision/Photodisc/Getty Images

2000

2001 Satellite radio begins
2002 Terrestrial digital radio
2003 ▶ iTunes
2005 *MGM v. Grokster* P2P decision
2011 Digital music sales surpass physical sales
2014 Apple retires the iPod; Patreon founded
2015 Catalog sales outpace new releases for first time
2017 Physical music sales surpass digital music sales; Kickstarter funds 25,000th music project
2018 Apple Podcast's 50 billionth podcast; Denmark declares stream ripping illegal
2019 *Billboard* counts video streams in music chart rankings
2020 Coronavirus in the US; British Parliament investigates streaming royalty payments



Jill Braaten/McGraw Hill

A Short History of Radio and Sound Recording

The particular stations you and your friend disagree about may be different than those in our opening vignette, but almost all of us have been through a similar conversation. Radio, the seemingly ubiquitous medium, matters to us. Because we often listen to it alone, it is personal. Radio is also mobile. It travels with us in the car, and we take it everywhere with our smartphones. Radio is specific as well. Stations aim their content at very narrowly defined audiences. These are characteristics of contemporary radio, but radio once occupied a very different place in our culture. Let's see how it all began.



▲ Guglielmo Marconi (seated).

AP image

Early Radio

Because both applied for patents within months of one another in the late 1890s, there remains disagreement over who "invented" radio, eastern European immigrant Nikola Tesla or Guglielmo

Marconi, son of a wealthy Italian businessman and his Irish wife. Marconi, however, is considered the "Father of Radio" because not only was he among the first to send signals through the air, but he was also adroit at gaining maximum publicity for his every success. His improvements over earlier experimental designs allowed him to send and receive telegraph code over distances as great as two miles by 1896.

His native Italy was not interested in his invention, so he used his mother's contacts in Great Britain to find support and financing there. England, with a global empire and the world's largest navy and merchant fleets, was naturally interested in long-distance wireless communication. With the financial and technical help of the British, Marconi successfully transmitted wireless signals across the English Channel in 1899 and across the Atlantic in 1901. Wireless was now a reality. Marconi was satisfied with his advance, but other scientists saw the transmission of voices by wireless as the next hurdle, a challenge that was soon surmounted.

In 1903 Reginald Fessenden, a Canadian, invented the **liquid barretter**, the first audio device permitting the reception of wireless voice transmissions. His 1906 Christmas Eve broadcast from Brant Rock, a small New England coastal village, was the first public broadcast of voices and music. His listeners were in ships at sea and a few newspaper offices equipped to receive the transmission.



▲ Lee DeForest.

Library of Congress Prints & Photographs Division [LC-USZ62-54114]

Later that same year American Lee DeForest invented the **audion tube**, a vacuum tube that improved and amplified wireless signals. Now the reliable transmission of clear voices and music was a reality. DeForest's second important contribution was that he saw radio as a means of *broadcasting.* The early pioneers, Marconi included, had viewed radio as a device for point-to-point communication—for example, from ship to ship or ship to shore. But in the 1907 prospectus for his radio company, DeForest wrote, "It will soon be possible to distribute grand opera music from transmitters placed on the stage of the Metropolitan Opera House by a Radio Telephone station on the roof to almost any dwelling in Greater New York and vicinity. . . . The same applies to large cities. Church music, lectures, etc., can be spread abroad by the Radio Telephone" (as quoted in **Adams, 1996**, pp. 104–106).

Soon, countless “broadcasters” went on the air. Some were giant corporations looking to dominate the medium for profit; some were hobbyists and hams playing with the medium for sheer joy. There were so many “stations” that havoc reigned. Yet the promise of radio was such that the medium continued to mature until World War I, when the US government ordered “the immediate closing of all stations for radio communications, both transmitting and receiving” (**Greb & Adams, 2003**, p. 109).

Early Sound Recording

The late 1800s have long been considered the beginning of sound recording. However, the 2008 discovery in a Paris archive of a 10-second recording by an obscure French tinkerer, Edouard-Leon Scott de Martinville, has some audio historians rethinking recording’s roots. Scott recorded a folk song on a device he called a phonautograph in 1860, and he always thought that Thomas Edison had stolen credit that should have been his (**“Edison Not,” 2008**). Nonetheless, in 1877 prolific inventor Edison patented his “talking machine,” a device for replicating sound that used a hand-cranked grooved cylinder and a needle. The mechanical movement caused by the needle passing along the groove of the rotating cylinder and hitting bumps was converted into electrical energy that activated a diaphragm in a loudspeaker and produced sound. The drawback was that only one “recording” could be made of any given sound; the cylinder could not be duplicated.

In 1887 that problem was solved by German immigrant Emile Berliner, whose gramophone used a flat, rotating, wax-coated disc that could easily be copied or pressed from a metal master. Two equally important Berliner contributions were the development of a sophisticated microphone and later (through his company RCA Victor Records) the import from Europe of recordings by famous opera stars. Now people had not only a reasonably priced record player but records to play on it as well. The next advance was the introduction of the two-sided disc by the Columbia Phonograph Company in 1905. Soon there were hundreds of phonograph or gramophone companies, and the device, by either name, was a standard feature in American homes by 1920. More than 2 million machines and 107 million recordings were sold in 1919 alone. Public acceptance of the new medium was enhanced even more by the development of electromagnetic recording in 1924 by Joseph P. Maxwell at Bell Laboratory.



In 1887 Emile Berliner developed the flat disc gramophone and a sophisticated microphone, both important to the widespread public acceptance of sound recordings for the home. Nipper, the trademark dog for RCA Victor, is on the scene even today.

Mooziic/Alamy Stock Photo

The parallel development and diffusion of radio and sound recording are significant. For the first time in history, radio allowed people to hear the words and music of others who were not in their presence. On recordings, they could hear words and music that may have been created days, months, or even years before. And the technology changed not only music, but also people's relationship with it: individual pieces of music became shorter to fit onto records; on-demand listening, rather than attending scheduled performances, became the norm; listening alone rather than in groups became common; people began defining themselves by their favored genre of music; and despite the fears of the new technology's critics, rather than people giving up making their own music, there was a burst of interest in playing music as listeners were inspired by what they were hearing (**Thompson, 2016**).

The Coming of Broadcasting

The idea of broadcasting—that is, transmitting voices and music at great distances to a large number of people—predated the development of radio. Alexander Graham Bell's telephone company had a subscription music service in major cities in the late 1800s, delivering music to homes and businesses by telephone wires. A front-page story in an 1877 edition of the *New York Daily Graphic* suggested the possibilities of broadcasting to its readers. The public anticipated and, after DeForest's much publicized successes, was eager for music and voices at home.

Russian immigrant David Sarnoff, then an employee of the company American Marconi, recognized this desire and in 1916 sent his superiors what has become famously known as the "Radio Music Box Memo." In this memo, Sarnoff wrote of

> a plan of development which would make radio a "household utility" in the same sense as the piano or phonograph. The idea is to bring music into the house by wireless. . . . The receiver can be designed in the form of a simple "Radio

> Music Box" and arranged for several different wavelengths, which should be changeable with the throwing of a single switch or pressing of a single button. (**Sterling & Kitross, 1990**, p. 43)

The introduction of broadcasting to a mass audience was delayed in the first two decades of the 20th century by patent fights and lawsuits. Yet when World War I ended, an enthusiastic audience awaited what had become a much-improved medium.

In a series of developments that would be duplicated for television at the time of World War II, radio was transformed from an exciting technological idea into an entertainment and commercial giant. To aid the war effort, the government took over the patents relating to radio and continued to improve radio for military use. Thus, refinement and development of the technical aspects of radio continued throughout the war. Then, when the war ended in 1919, the patents were returned to their owners—and the bickering was renewed.

Concerned that the medium would be wasted and fearful that a foreign company (British Marconi) would control this vital resource, the US government forced the combatants to merge. American Marconi, General Electric, American Telephone & Telegraph, and Westinghouse (in 1921)—each in control of a vital piece of technology—joined to create the Radio Corporation of America (RCA). RCA was a government-sanctioned monopoly, but its creation avoided direct government control of the new medium. Twenty-eight-year-old David Sarnoff, author of the Radio Music Box Memo, was made RCA's commercial manager. The way for the medium's popular growth was paved; its success was guaranteed by a public that, because of the phonograph, was already attuned to music in the home and, thanks to the just-concluded war, was awakening to the need for instant, wide-ranging news and information.



▲ This cover of an 1877 newspaper proved prophetic in its image of speakers' ability to "broadcast" their words.

Collection of the New-York Historical Society, USA/Bridgeman Images

On September 30, 1920, a Westinghouse executive, impressed with press accounts of the number of listeners who were picking up broadcasts from the garage radio station of company engineer Frank Conrad, asked him to move his operation to the Westinghouse factory and expand its power. Conrad did so, and on October 27, 1920, experimental station 8XK in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, received a

license from the Department of Commerce to broadcast. On November 2, this station, renamed KDKA, made the first commercial radio broadcast, announcing the results of the presidential election that sent Warren G. Harding to the White House. By mid-1922, there were nearly 1 million radios in American homes, up from 50,000 just a year before (Tillinghast, 2000, p. 41).

The Coming of Regulation

As the RCA agreements demonstrated, the government had a keen interest in the development, operation, and diffusion of radio. At first, government interest focused on point-to-point communication. In 1910 Congress passed the Wireless Ship Act, requiring that all ships using American ports and carrying more than 50 passengers have a working wireless and operator. Of course, the wireless industry did not object, as the legislation boosted sales. However, after the *Titanic* struck an iceberg in the North Atlantic in 1912 and it was learned that hundreds of lives were lost needlessly because other ships in the area had left their radios unattended, Congress passed the Radio Act of 1912, which not only strengthened rules regarding shipboard wireless but also required that wireless operators be licensed by the Secretary of Commerce and Labor.

The Radio Act of 1912 established spheres of authority for both federal and state governments, provided for distributing and revoking licenses, fined violators, and assigned frequencies for station operation. The government was in the business of regulating what was to become broadcasting, a development that angered many operators. They successfully challenged the 1912 act in court, and eventually President Calvin Coolidge ordered the cessation of government regulation of radio despite his belief that chaos would descend on the medium.

He proved prophetic. The industry's years of flouting the 1912 act had led it to the brink of disaster. Radio sales and profits dropped dramatically. Listeners were tired of the chaos. Stations arbitrarily changed frequencies, power, and hours of operation, and there was constant interference between stations, often intentional. Radio industry leaders petitioned Commerce Commissioner Herbert Hoover and, according to historian Erik Barnouw—who titled his 1966 book on radio's early days *A Tower in Babel*—"encouraged firmness" in government efforts to regulate and control the competitors. The government's response was the Radio Act of 1927. Order was restored and the industry prospered, but the broadcasters had made an important concession to secure this saving intervention. The 1927 act authorized them to *use* the airwaves, which belonged to the public, but not to *own* them. Broadcasters were thus simply the caretakers of the airwaves, a national resource.

The act further stated that when a license was awarded, the standard of evaluation would be the public interest, convenience, or necessity. The Federal Radio Commission (FRC) was established to administer the provisions of the act. This **trustee model** of regulation is based on two premises (Bittner, 1994). The first is **spectrum scarcity**. Because broadcast spectrum space is limited and not everyone who wants to broadcast can, those who are granted licenses to serve a local area must accept regulation. The second reason for regulation revolves around the issue of influence. Broadcasting reaches virtually everyone in society. By definition, this renders radio powerful.



▲ The wireless-telegraphy room of the *Titanic*. Despite the heroic efforts of wireless operator Jack Philips, hundreds of people died needlessly in the sinking of that great ocean liner because ships in its vicinity did not monitor their receivers.

Universal History Archive/UIG/Getty Images

The Communications Act of 1934 replaced the 1927 legislation. The FRC gave way to the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), and its regulatory authority, which continues today, was cemented.

Advertising and the Networks

While the regulatory structure of the medium was evolving, so were its financial bases. The formation of RCA had ensured that radio would be a commercial, profit-based medium. The industry initially

supported itself through the sale of receivers. The problem was that once everybody had a radio, people would stop buying them. The solution was advertising. On August 22, 1922, New York station WEAF accepted the first radio commercial, a 10-minute spot for Long Island brownstone apartments. The cost of the ad was $50.

The sale of advertising led to the establishment of national radio **networks**. Groups of stations, or **affiliates**, all broadcasting identical content from a single distributor, could deliver larger audiences, realizing greater advertising revenues, which would allow them to hire bigger stars and produce better programming, which would attract larger audiences, which could be sold for even greater fees to advertisers.

RCA set up a 24-station network, the National Broadcasting Company (NBC), in 1926. A year later it bought AT&T's stations and launched a second network, NBC Blue (the original NBC was renamed NBC Red). The Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) was also founded in 1927, but it struggled until 26-year-old millionaire cigar maker William S. Paley bought it in 1928, making it a worthy competitor to NBC. The fourth network, Mutual, was established in 1934 largely on the strength of its hit Western *The Lone Ranger.* Four midwestern and eastern stations came together to sell advertising on it and other shows; soon Mutual had 60 affiliates. Mutual differed from the other major national networks in that it did not own and operate its own flagship stations (called **O&Os**, for owned and operated).

By 1938 the four national networks had affiliated virtually all the large US stations and the majority of smaller operations as well. These corporations grew so powerful that in 1943 the government forced NBC to divest itself of one of its networks. It sold NBC Blue to Life Saver candy-maker Edward Noble, who renamed it the American Broadcasting Company (ABC).

The fundamental basis of broadcasting (radio and later television) in the United States was now set:

- Broadcasters were private, commercially owned enterprises rather than government operations.
- Governmental regulation was based on the public interest.
- Stations were licensed to serve specific localities, but national networks programmed the most lucrative hours with the largest audiences.
- Entertainment and information (news, weather, and sports) were the basic broadcast content.
- Advertising formed the basis of financial support for broadcasting.

The Golden Age



George Burns and Gracie Allen were CBS comedy stars during radio's golden age. They were among the many radio performers to move easily and successfully to television.

Bettmann/Getty Images

The networks ushered in radio's golden age. Although the 1929–1939 Great Depression damaged the phonograph industry, it helped boost the radio industry. Phonographs and records cost money, but once a family bought a radio, a whole world of entertainment and information was at its disposal, free of charge. The number of homes with radios grew from 12 million in 1930 to 30 million in 1940, and half of them had not one but two receivers. Ad revenues rose from $40 million to $155 million over the same period. The four national networks broadcast 156 combined hours of network-originated programming a week. New genres became fixtures during this period: comedy (*The Jack Benny Show*, *Fibber McGee and Molly*), audience participation (*Professor Quiz*, *Truth or Consequences*), children's shows (*Little Orphan Annie*, *The Lone Ranger*), soap operas (*Oxydol's Own Ma Perkins*, *The Guiding Light*), and drama (Orson Welles's *The Mercury Theatre on the Air*). News, too, became a radio staple.

RADIO AND SOUND RECORDING IN WORLD WAR II

The golden age of radio shone even more brightly as the United States entered World War II in 1941. Radio was used to sell war bonds, and much content was aimed at boosting the nation's morale. The war increased the desire for news, especially from abroad. The conflict also caused a paper shortage, reducing advertising space in newspapers. No new stations were licensed during the war years, so the 950 existing broadcasters reaped all the broadcast advertising revenues, as well as additional ad revenues that otherwise would have gone to newspapers.

Sound recording benefited from the war as well. Prior to World War II, recording in the United States was done either directly to master metal discs or on wire recorders, literally magnetic recording on

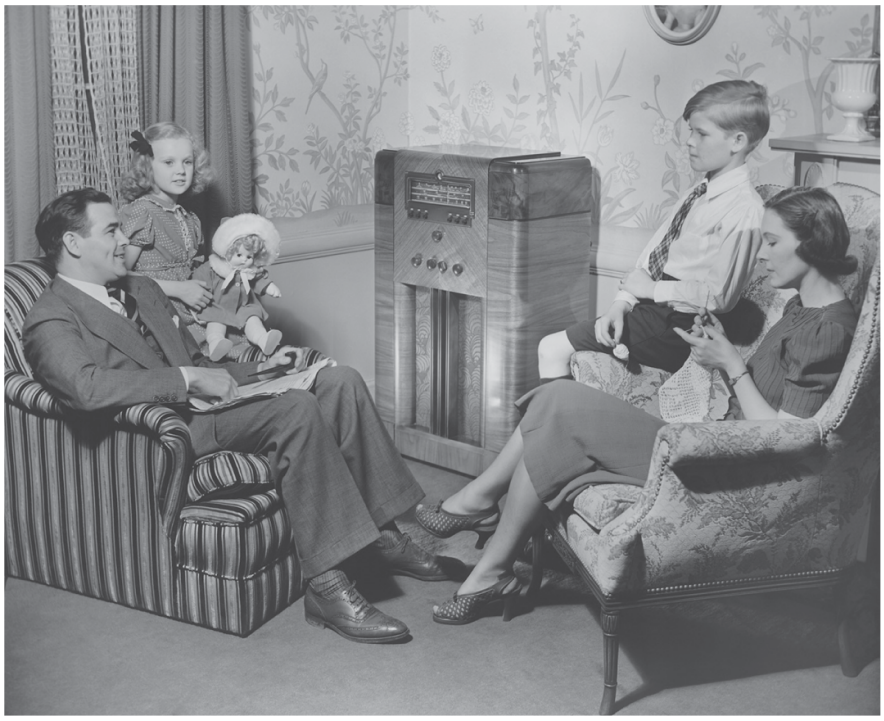
metal wire. But GIs brought a new technology back from occupied Germany, a tape recorder that used an easily handled paper tape on a reel.

Then, in 1947, Columbia Records introduced a new 33⅓ rpm (rotations-per-minute) long-playing plastic record. A big advance over the previous standard of 78 rpm, it was more durable than the older shellac discs and played for 23 rather than 3⅓ minutes. Columbia offered the technology free to all other record companies. RCA refused the offer, introducing its own 45 rpm disc in 1948. It played for only 3⅓ minutes and had a huge center hole requiring a special adapter.

Still, RCA persisted in its marketing, causing a speed war that was settled in 1950 when the two giants compromised on 33⅓ as the standard for classical music and 45 as the standard for pop. And it was the 45, the single (played on cheap plastic record players that cost around $13; **Menard, 2015**), that sustained the music business until the mid-1960s, when the Beatles not only ushered in the "British invasion" of rock 'n' roll but also transformed popular music into a 33⅓ album-dominant cultural force, shaping today's popular music and helping reinvent radio.

TELEVISION ARRIVES

When the war ended and radio licenses were granted again, the number of stations grew rapidly to 2,000. Annual ad revenues reached $454 million in 1950. Then came television. Network affiliation dropped from 97% in 1945 to 50% by the mid-1950s, as stations "went local" in the face of television's national dominance. National radio advertising income dipped to $35 million in 1960, the year that television found its way into 90% of American homes. If radio were to survive, it would have to find new functions.



▲ Family radio time disappeared with the coming of television.

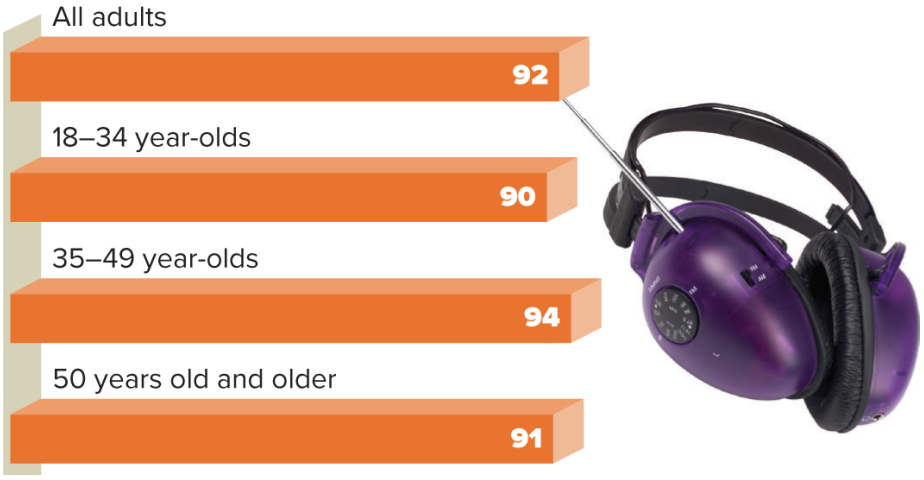
George Marks/Retrofile RF/Getty Images

Radio and Its Audiences

Radio more than survived; it prospered by changing the nature of its relationship with its audiences. The easiest way to understand this is to see pretelevision radio as network television is today—nationally oriented, broadcasting an array of recognizable entertainment program formats, populated by well-known stars and personalities, and consumed primarily in the home, typically with people sitting around the set. Posttelevision radio is local, fragmented, specialized, personal, and mobile. Whereas pretelevision radio was characterized by the big national networks, today's radio is dominated by formats, a particular sound characteristic of a local station.

Who are the people who make up radio's audience? In an average week, approximately 248 million people, 92% of all Americans 12 and over, will listen to the radio, making it the American mass medium with the greatest degree of audience reach. However, broadcast radio's audience size has shown almost no growth over the last few years, and time spent listening has fallen, dropping by an average of about 1 minute a day. Most troubling to radio professionals, though, is that time listening among young people is in decline (**Radio Advertising Bureau, 2020**).

The industry itself attributes this situation to dissatisfaction with unimaginative programming, hypercommercialization—on average between 12 and 16 minutes of commercials an hour—and the availability of online music sources and mobile technologies such as tablets and smartphones. Broadcast veteran Bob **Lefsetz (2013)** explains, "If you don't think new [digital] services will kill [commercial] radio, you must like inane commercials, you must like me-too music, you must think airplay on one of these outlets will sell millions of albums, but that almost never happens anymore" (p. 30). As it is, over 80% of Americans now listen to radio on digital devices (**Kelly, 2019**), and as you can see in **Figure 7.1**, radio's reach is lowest for younger adults.



▲ **Figure 7.1** Radio's Weekly Reach by Age (% of US Population).

Source: ***Kelly, 2019***.

(photo): Stockbyte/PunchStock/ Getty Images

Scope and Nature of the Radio Industry

There are 15,478 full-power broadcast radio stations operating in the United States today: 4,580 commercial AM stations, 6,726 commercial FM stations, and 4,172 noncommercial FM stations. These are joined on the dial by 2,159 **low power FM (LPFM)** stations. There are more than two radios for every person in the United States. Despite remaining people's primary means of consuming audio content, radio has seen recent annual highs in ad sales of more $17 billion drop to around $15 billion (**Andrews, 2019**), and with the coronavirus's damage to local business—the medium's primary ad buyer—annual revenue has declined to just over $11 billion (**Radio Ink, 2020**).

FM, AM, and Noncommercial Radio

Although FMs constitute 60% of all commercial stations (to AMs' 40%), as much as 85% of all listening is on FM. In fact, from 2015 to 2020, while the numbers of commercial, noncommercial, and LPFM stations all either held steady or increased, the number of AM stations actually decreased (**Federal Communications Commission, 2020**). This has to do with the technology behind each. The FM (frequency modulation) signal is wider, allowing the broadcast not only of stereo (sound perceived from multiple channels, for example, bass and drums from the left speaker and guitars and vocals from the right) but also of better fidelity to the original sound than the narrower AM (amplitude modulation) signal. As a result, people attracted to music gravitate toward FM. People favoring news, sports, and information tend to find themselves listening to the AM dial. AM signals travel farther than FM signals, making them perfect for rural parts of the country. Rural areas tend to be less heavily populated, so most AM stations serve fewer listeners.

Many of today's FM stations are noncommercial—that is, they accept no advertising. When the national frequency allocation plan was established during the deliberations leading to the 1934 Communications Act, commercial radio broadcasters persuaded Congress that they alone could be trusted to develop this valuable medium. They promised to make time available for religious, children's, and other educational programming. Despite the fact that 40% of existing stations at the time were noncommercial, operated by churches, local governments, universities, and radio clubs (**Zuckerman, 2019**), no frequencies were set aside for noncommercial radio to fulfill these functions.

In 1945, at the insistence of critics who contended that the commercial broadcasters were not fulfilling their promise, the FCC set aside all FM frequencies between 88.1 and 91.9 megahertz for noncommercial radio. Today these noncommercial stations not only provide local service, but many also offer national network quality programming through affiliation with National Public Radio (NPR) and Public Radio International (PRI) or through a number of smaller national networks, such as Pacifica Network. Bucking the trend in most other media, public stations are strengthening their local journalism and, as such, show stronger audience growth than other types of stations (**Jensen, 2020**).

Radio Is Local

No longer able to compete with television for the national audience in the 1950s, radio began to attract a local audience. Because it costs much more to run a local television station than a local radio station, radio advertising rates tend to be as much as three times lower than television's to reach an equivalent-size audience. Local advertisers can afford radio more easily than they can television, which increases the local flavor of radio. And radio can be localized even more narrowly than by city or town, as you'll soon read.

Radio Is Fragmented

Radio stations are widely distributed throughout the United States. Virtually every town— even those with only a few hundred residents—has at least one station. The number of stations licensed in an area is a function of both population and proximity to other towns. Small towns may have only one AM or FM station, and a big city can have as many as 40 stations. This fragmentation—many stations serving many areas—makes possible contemporary radio's most important characteristic: its ability to specialize.

Radio Is Specialized

When radio became a local medium, it could no longer program the expensive, star-filled genres of its golden age. The problem now was how to program a station with interesting content and do so economically. A disc jockey (DJ) playing records was the best solution. Stations soon learned that a highly specialized, specific audience of particular interest to certain advertisers could be attracted with specific types of music. **Format** radio was born. Of course, choosing a specific format means accepting that many potential listeners will not tune in, but in format radio, the size of the audience is secondary to its composition.

American radio is home to about 60 different formats, from the most common, which include country, top 40, album-oriented rock, and all talk, to the somewhat uncommon, for example, world ethnic. Many stations, especially those in rural areas, offer **secondary services** (additional, nonpri-mary formats). For example, a country station may broadcast a religious format for 10 hours on Saturday and Sunday. In addition, radio's specialization permits an infinite variety of formats, for example, one or more stations in almost every city in America will switch to the Seasonal/Holiday format sometime between Thanksgiving and New Years Day. **Figure 7.2** shows radio's top formats.



Figure 7.2 Top 15 **Radio Formats, 2020**.

Source: ***Katz Radio Group, 2020***.
(photo): Photodisc/Rubberball/Getty Image



The DJ and playlist have come to personify modern commercial radio since the 1950s.

H. ARMSTRONG ROBERTS/Classic-Stock/Alamy Stock Photo

Format radio offers stations many advantages beyond low-cost operations and specialized audiences that appeal to advertisers. Faced with falling listenership or loss of advertising, a station can simply change DJs and music. Neither television nor the print media have this content flexibility. When confronted with competition from a station with a similar format, a station can further narrow its audience by specializing its formula even more.

Music format radio requires a disc jockey. Someone has to play the music and provide the talk. The modern DJ is the invention of Todd Storz, who bought KOWH in Omaha, Nebraska, in 1949. He turned the radio personality/music formula on its head. Before Storz, radio announcers would talk most of the time and occasionally play music to rest their voices. Storz wanted more music, less talk. He thought radio should sound like a jukebox—the same few songs people wanted to hear played over and over again. His top-40 format, which demanded strict adherence to a **playlist** (a predetermined sequence of selected songs) of popular music for young people, up-tempo pacing, and catchy

production gimmicks, became the standard for the posttelevision popular music station. Gordon McClendon of KLIF in Dallas refined the top-40 format and developed others, such as "beautiful music," and is therefore often considered, along with Storz, one of the two pioneers of format radio.

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Radio Is Personal

With the advent of television, the relationship of radio with its audience changed. Whereas families had previously gathered around the radio to listen together, people now typically listen to the radio alone. We select personally pleasing formats, and we listen as an adjunct to other personally important activities.

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Radio Is Mobile

The mobility of radio accounts in large part for its personal nature. We can listen anywhere at any time. We listen at work, while exercising, or while sitting in the sun. By 1947, the combined sale of car and alarm clock radios exceeded that of traditional living-room receivers, and in 1951, the annual production of car radios exceeded that of home receivers for the first time. Today, the majority, nearly three-quarters of all traditional radio listening occurs away from home. In fact, most listening occurs in the car, with 52% of daily listeners most often tuning in in the car (Richter, 2020), as you can see in Figure 7.3.

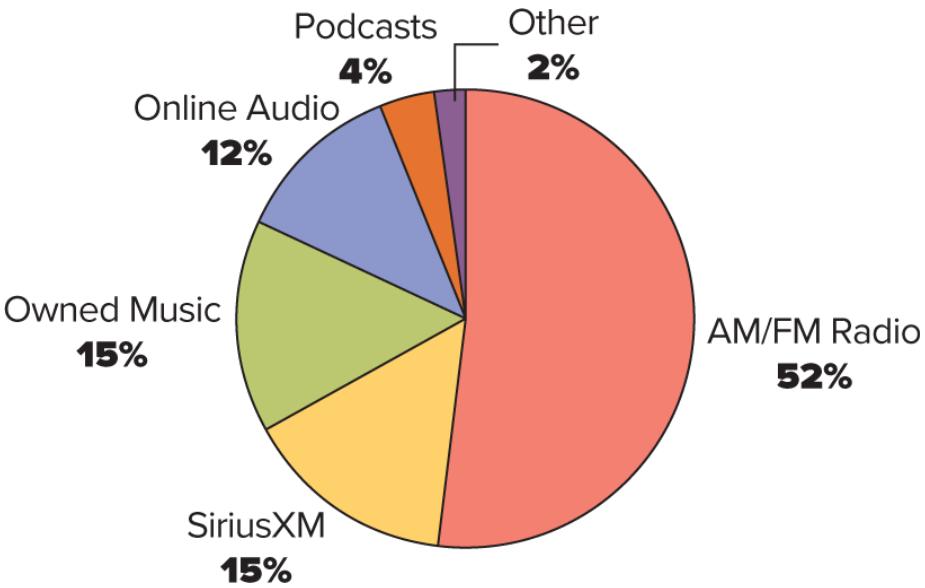


Figure 7.3 Audio Source Most Often Used in the Car by American Drivers.

Source: *Richter, 2020*.

The Business of Radio

The distinctive characteristics of radio serve its listeners, but they also make radio a profitable business.

Radio as an Advertising Medium

Advertisers enjoy the specialization of radio because it gives them access to homogeneous groups of listeners to whom products can be pitched. Income earned from the sale of airtime is called **billings**. Local commercials and national spots (for example, Prestone Antifreeze buys time on several thousand stations in winter areas) account for the vast majority of all billings; network time makes up the rest. The cost of time is based on the **ratings**, the percentage of the total available audience reached.

Radio is an attractive advertising medium for reasons other than its delivery of a homogeneous audience. Radio ads are inexpensive to produce and therefore can be changed, updated, and specialized to meet specific audience demands. Ads can also be specialized to different times of the day. For example, a hamburger restaurant may have one version of its commercial for the morning audience, in which its breakfast menu is touted, and a different version for the evening audience driving home and dreading the thought of cooking dinner. Radio time is inexpensive to buy, especially when compared with television. Industry data show that buying radio time delivers a return of up to $23 on every dollar invested depending on the type of business advertised, in this case, retail stores (**Nielsen Audio, 2020**).

Finally, an audience loyal to a specific format station is presumably loyal to those who advertise on it. Radio is the listeners' friend; it travels with them and talks to them personally. "We are not providing music to people," explains iHeart Media's CEO Bob Pittman. "We are providing companionship to people. If you go into this thinking our job is to put music on, you'll miss the point" (in **Andrews, 2019**).

Deregulation and Ownership

The business of radio is being altered by deregulation and changes in ownership rules. To ensure that there were many different perspectives in the cultural forum, the FCC had long limited the number of radio stations one person or company could own to one AM and one FM locally and seven AMs and seven FMs nationally. These numbers were revised upward in the late 1980s, and controls were almost totally eliminated by the Telecommunications Act of 1996. Now, due to this **deregulation**, there are no national ownership limits, and one person or company can own as many as eight stations in one area, depending on the size of the market. This situation has allowed **duopoly**—one person or company owning and managing multiple radio stations in a single market—to explode.

Since the passage of the 1996 act, more than 10,000 radio stations have been sold, and there are now 1,100 fewer station owners, a 30% decline. The vast majority of these sales have been to already-large radio groups such as iHeart Media (850 stations in 153 markets), Cumulus (446 in 87 markets), and Entercom (235 in 48 markets). As a result, in 25 of the 50 largest radio markets, three

companies claim 80% of all listeners. In over 40 cities, one-third of the radio stations are owned by a single company, leading insiders to identify the industry's two biggest problems not as competition from new digital technologies, but first as "control of the industry in the hands of a few giants" and a close second as "decline of local radio with its deep communities ties" (**Editors, 2015**).

The concern over these issues runs deep. Local public affairs shows now make up less than one-half of 1% of all commercial broadcast time in the United States. "There is a crisis," said FCC commissioner Michael **Copps (2011**), "when more than one-third of our commercial broadcasters offer little to no news whatsoever to their communities of license. America's news and information resources keep shrinking and hundreds of stories that could inform our citizens go untold and, indeed, undiscovered."

As for the music, a few years ago, when Clear Channel (now iHeart Media) and Cumulus collectively laid off hundreds of DJs in a move toward automated (no live DJ) and nationally syndicated programming, veteran Los Angeles rock DJ Jim Ladd said, "It's really bad news. It was people in my profession that first played Tom Petty, first played the Doors. But the people programming stations now are not music people—they're business people" (in **Knopper, 2011**, p. 19). It's important to note that Entercom stations, unlike those of the other giants, are locally programmed.

LPFM, 10- to 100-watt nonprofit community radio stations with a reach of only a few miles, are one response to "the homogenization of the FM band." As a result of the Local Community Radio Act of 2010, which enjoyed wide bipartisan support in Congress, 2,159 LPFM stations, serving all 50 states, now offer opportunities for additional radio voices to serve their local listenerships. The FCC encourages the growth of LPFM with regular online webinars explaining the application process to potential operators of this local medium designed to expand the number of community voices, promote media diversity, and enhance local radio programming. For example, the Pascua Yaqui Tribe in Arizona operates low-power KPTY; Seattle's KBFG broadcasts *Tristan's Bedtime Radio Hour*, hosted by 5-year-old Tristan; and KSFL of Portland, Oregon, features music from local bands.

Scope and Nature of the Recording Industry

When the DJs and top-40 format saved radio in the 1950s, they also changed for all time popular music and, by extension, the recording industry. Disc jockeys were color-deaf in their selection of records. They introduced record buyers to rhythm 'n' blues in the music of African American artists such as Chuck Berry and Little Richard. Until the mid-1950s, the works of these performers had to be **covered**—rerecorded by white artists such as Perry Como—before it was aired. Teens loved the new sound, however, and it became the foundation of their own subculture, as well as the basis for the explosion in recorded music. See the essay "Rock 'n' Roll, Radio, and Race Relations" for more on rock's roots.

Today more than 5,000 American companies annually release around 100,000 new albums, or more precisely **album equivalents**, a more contemporary and precise measurement that equals the purchase of one album (10 cuts), including streaming, downloads, and traditional album sales, on thousands of different labels. In 2020 American music buyers *purchased* 980.7 million (with an *m*) pieces of music in both digital (27%) and physical (73%) formats, but *streamed* 872.6 billion (with a *b*) more, producing domestic industry revenues in excess of $12 billion. Globally, there were 2.2 trillion (with a *t*) music streams, a 22.6% increase over the previous year, producing revenues of more than $20 billion (**"Year End," 2021**; **RIAA, 2020**).

The Major Recording Companies



Little Richard was one of the early rock 'n' roll artists to make a lie of what American teens' dominant culture had to say about race and the inadequacies of African Americans.

Edd Westmacott/Alamy Stock Photo

Three major recording companies control most of the global recorded music market. Two (Sony and Universal) control nearly three-quarters of the world's $20 billion global music sales. Two of the three are foreign-owned:

- Sony, controlling about 30% of the world music market, is a Japanese-owned corporate group. Its labels include Columbia, Epic, RCA, and Arista.
- New York–based Warner Music Group, controlling about 20%, is owned by billionaire Len Blavatnik's Access Industries and several private investors. Its labels include Atlantic, Elektra, and Warner Bros.
- Universal Music Group, controlling about 40%, is owned by French conglomerate Vivendi Universal and controls labels such as EMI, MCA, Capitol, and Def Jam Records (**Duncan, 2020**).

Critics have long voiced concern over conglomeration in the music business, a concern that centers on the traditional cultural value of music, especially for young people. Multibillion-dollar conglomerates typically are not rebellious in their cultural tastes, nor are they usually willing to take risks on new ideas. These duties have fallen primarily to the independent labels, companies such as Real World Records and Epitaph. Still, problems with the music industry–audience relationship remain.

Cultural homogenization is the worrisome outcome of virtually all the world's influential recording being controlled by a few profit-oriented giants. If bands or artists cannot immediately deliver the goods, they aren't signed. So derivative artists and manufactured groups dominate—for example, JoJo Siwa and One Direction. Moreover, popular music is increasingly the product not of individual genius or artistry but of **mathematical songwriting**, songs written specifically to be commercial hits. They are "written to track, which means a producer makes a beat. Then a songwriter listens to it and attempts to generate words that fit that beat, sometimes singing nonsense until the language begins to take shape. It's more about how lyrics sound than what they mean. This has become a bedrock part of the industry" (**Lansky, 2015/2016**, p. 124).

Although a few artists like David Bowie were experimenting with it in the 1990s (**Deahl, 2019**), there is growing concern over **AI (artificial intelligence) songwriting**, composition of music and lyrics by computers. Programmed to "think" and act like a human, an AI machine "learns" to take actions that have the best chance of achieving a specific goal, in this case, writing hit songs. The music industry estimates that in the next 10 years, 20% to 30% of the top-40 singles will be written partially or totally by machine-learning software. It's no different than using any other technology, for example, synthesizers and drum machines, argue AI supporters. Music was once written with quill and parchment, they say, but now composers use computers.

However, its critics argue that it will produce just more of the same, killing creativity and artistry in songwriting. They point to one of AI's most common functions, analyzing libraries of songs and industry sales figures to predict (and write) songs that have the best chance of being hits (**Reilly, 2018**). A hit song is also as likely to come from a "songwriting camp," where groups of songwriters and musicians convene to construct hits. Hits like Drake's *Nice for What* had 16 writers and Cardi B's *Be Careful* had 17. "Looking at the charts, nine times out of ten, pretty much everything is co-written," explains BMI vice president Samantha Cox. "There's at least three to four to five writers on every song that's out there right now" (**Knopper, 2018**).

USING MEDIA TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Rock 'n' Roll, Radio, and Race Relations

After World War II, African Americans in the United States refused to remain invisible. Having fought in segregated units in Europe and proven their willingness to fight and die for freedom abroad, they openly demanded freedom at home. President Harry Truman, recognizing the absurdity of racial separation in the self-proclaimed "greatest democracy on earth," desegregated the armed forces by executive order in 1948.

These early stirrings of equality led to a sense among African Americans that anything was possible, and that feeling seeped into their music. What had been called *cat*, *sepia*, or *race* music took on a new tone. While this new sound borrowed from traditional Black music—gospel, blues, and laments over slavery and racial injustice—it was different, much different. Music historian Ed Ward said that this bolder, more aggressive music "spoke to a shared experience, not just to black (usually rural black) life," and it would become the "truly biracial popular music in this country" (**Ward, Stokes, & Tucker, 1986**, p. 83).

Hundreds of small independent record companies sprang up to produce this newly labeled rhythm 'n' blues (R&B), which focused on Americans' shared experiences with topics that were part of life for people of all colors, such as sex and alcohol. With its earthy lyrics and thumping dance beat, R&B very quickly found an audience in the 1950s, one composed largely of urban Blacks (growing in number as African Americans increasingly migrated north) and white teenagers.

The major record companies took notice, and rather than sign already successful R&B artists, they had their white artists cover the Blacks hits. The Penguins's "Earth Angel" was covered by the reassuringly named Crew Cuts, who also covered the Chords's "Sh-Boom." Chuck Berry's "Maybellene" was covered by both the Johnny Long and Ralph Marterie orchestras. Even Bill Haley and the Comets's youth anthem "Shake, Rattle and Roll" was a cover of a Joe Turner tune.

However, these covers actually served to introduce even more white teens to the new music, and these kids demanded the original versions. This did not escape the attention of Sam Phillips, who in 1952 founded Sun Records in an effort to bring Black music to white teens. "If I could find a white man who had the Negro sound, I could make a billion dollars," he is reported to have mused (in **Menard, 2015**, p. 83). In 1954 he found that man: Elvis Presley, whose breakout hit, *Hound Dog*, was a cover of R&B singer Big Mama Thornton's 1953 song.

The situation also caught the attention of Cleveland DJ Alan Freed, whose nationally distributed radio (and later television) show featured Black R&B tunes, never covers. Freed began calling the music he played rock 'n' roll (to signify that it was Black and

white youth music), and by 1955, when Freed took his show to New York, the cover business was dead. Black performers were recording and releasing their own music to a national audience, and people of all colors were tuning in.

Now that the kids had a music of their own, and now that a growing number of radio stations were willing to program it, a youth culture began to develop, one that was antagonistic toward their parents' culture. The music was central to this antagonism, not only because it was gritty and real but also because it exposed the hypocrisy of adult culture.

For young people of the mid-1950s and 1960s, the music of Little Richard, Fats Domino, Ray Charles, and Chuck Berry made a lie of all that their parents, teachers, and government leaders had said about race, the inferiority of African Americans, and African Americans' satisfaction with the status quo.

Ralph Bass, a producer for independent R&B label Chess Records, described the evolution to historian David Szatmary from his experience touring with R&B groups in the early 1950s:

> They didn't let whites into the clubs. Then they got "white spectator tickets" for the worst corner of the joint. They had to keep the white kids out, so they'd have white nights sometimes, or they'd put a rope across the middle of the floor. The blacks on one side, the whites on the other, digging how the blacks were dancing and copying them. Then, hell, the rope would come down, and they'd all be dancing together. Salt and pepper all mixed together. (**Szatmary, 2000**, p. 21)

Popular music did not end racism, but it made a difference, one that would eventually make it possible for Americans who wanted to do so to free themselves of racism's ugly hold. Rock and R&B (and the radio stations that played them) would again nudge the nation toward its better tendencies during the antiwar and civil rights movements of the late 1960s. And popular music was there again in 2020, during the "nationwide awakening to civil rights" following the killing of George Floyd. It was then that millions of Americans, "searching for music that speaks to the current moment," turned to artists like Childish Gambino ("This is America") and Kendrick Lamar ("All Right") to help articulate their anger at what they saw as their nation's failure to live its ideals (**Stevens, 2020a**).

The *dominance of profit over artistry* worries many music fans. When a major label must spend millions to sign a bankable artist, such as Jay Z ($150 million), Bruce Springsteen ($150 million), or Adele ($130 million), it typically pares lesser-known, potentially more innovative artists from its roster. The chase for profit has also produced an increase in the number of product placements in songs (**Sánchez-Olmos & Castelló-Martínez, 2020**) and the use of computer algorithms to determine which songs are sufficiently similar to existing hits to even warrant recording (**Timberg, 2015**). "Just as major movie studios tend to finance only films with strong projected box-office returns, major record labels prefer to avoid risk, especially in an era when digital streaming has slashed profit margins. Executives mine social-media data to identify the next viral sensation, or pair unknown acts with established producers and songwriters to manufacture hits," explains music critic Matthew **Trammell (2017**, p. 45).

Trends and Convergence in Radio and Sound Recording

Emerging and changing technologies have affected the production and distribution aspects of both radio and sound recording.

The Impact of Television

We have seen how television fundamentally altered radio's structure and relationship with its audiences. Television, specifically the cable channel MTV, changed the recording industry, too. MTV's introduction in 1981 helped pull the industry out of its disastrous 1979 slump, but at a price. First, the look of concerts has changed. No longer is it sufficient to pack an artist or group into a hall or stadium with a few thousand screaming fans. Now a concert must be an extravagant multimedia event approximating the sophistication of a music video. For example, U2's 360 Degrees tour needed 120 trucks to move its stage, screen, lights, 250 speakers, and other equipment from venue to venue. Beyoncé's Formation tour of Europe used 7 Boeing 747 cargo planes to transport all its necessary stage equipment (**Iyengar, 2018**). This means that fewer acts take to the road, changing the relationship between musicians and fans.

Second, the radio–recording industry relationship has changed. Even as MTV began to program fewer and fewer music videos, record companies grew even more reliant on television to introduce new music. For example, labels now time record releases and promotions to artists' television appearances, and new and old tunes alike find heavy play on television shows. Contestants on *The Voice* and *American Idol*, and before they left the air, the casts of *Glee* and *Nashville*, sold tens of millions of songs, and newer programs such as *Zoey's Extraordinary Playlist*, *High Fidelity*, and James Cordon's *Carpool Karaoke* now introduce or reintroduce and music to fans, producing sales and streams.



▼ TV is the new radio. TV shows such as *Zoey's Extraordinary Playlist* (pictured here) and Hulu's *High Fidelity* introduce and eventually sell music, sometimes new, sometimes old, to their fans.

TCD/Prod.DB/Alamy Stock Photo

And if television has become the new radio, so has the Internet. YouTube, the world's largest source of streaming music, accounting for 47% of all on-demand play time globally (**Dayen, 2021**), served as the career launchpad for pop star Justin Bieber, who in 2007 used a series of homemade videos of his 12-year-old self singing in the mirror and around his hometown to catch the eye of the star-hungry record industry, as it did for 16-year-old New Zealander Lorde. Her success as a self-release, free-download Internet music star led Universal to commercially distribute her work, making both the song "Royals" and the artist global smash hits. Universal has since established Awesomeness Music, a label and YouTube channel specifically designed to record and promote YouTube talent such as Cimorelli, singing sisters from California whose channel has more than 5.4 million subscribers. In 2019, *Billboard* announced it would begin counting video plays from YouTube, Apple, and other video streaming sites in its top-music charts.

Satellite and Cable

The convergence of radio and satellite has aided the rebirth of the radio networks. Music and other forms of radio content can be distributed quite inexpensively to thousands of stations. As a result, one "network" can provide very different services to its very different affiliates. Sports broadcaster ESPN, for example, maintains its own radio network, and Westwood One distributes the Rick Dees Weekly Top 40 to 200 of its 8,000 affiliates. In addition, Westwood One, through its **syndication** operations, delivers thousands of varied network and program syndication services to almost every commercial station in the country. The low cost of producing radio programming, however, makes the establishment of other, even more specialized networks possible. Satellites and fiber-optic Internet make access to syndicated content and formats affordable for many stations. Syndicators can deliver news, top-10 shows, and other content to stations on a market-by-market basis. They can also provide entire formats, requiring local stations, if they wish, to do little more than insert commercials into what sounds to listeners to be a local broadcast.

Satellite has another application as well. Many listeners now receive "radio" through their cable televisions in the form of satellite-delivered services such as DMX (Digital Music Express) and Music Choice. Direct satellite home, office, and automobile delivery of audio by **digital audio radio service (DARS)** brings Sirius XM Radio to nearly 35 million American subscribers by offering hundreds of commercial channels—primarily talk, sports, and traffic— and commercial-free channels—primarily music. Those numbers will likely continue to grow because the company has arrangements with every major carmaker in the country to offer its receivers as a factory-installed option. DARS has proven to be so sufficiently inexpensive, reliable, and technologically sophisticated that Norway ceased all terrestrial broadcasting in 2017, making DARS its standard radio-delivery technology. Several other European countries are considering the same move.

Terrestrial Digital Radio

Since late 2002, thousands of radio stations have begun broadcasting **terrestrial** (land-based) **digital radio**. Relying on digital compression technology called **in-band-on-channel (IBOC)**, terrestrial digital radio allows broadcasters to transmit not only their usual analog signal but one or more digital signals using their existing spectrum space. And although IBOC also improves sound fidelity, making possible high-definition radio, many stations using the technology see its greatest value in pay services—for example, subscription data delivery. IBOC has yet to completely replace analog radio, as many stations today continue to air both digital and analog services.

Web Radio and Podcasting

Radio's convergence with digital technologies is nowhere more pronounced and potentially profound than in **Web radio**, the delivery of "radio" directly to individual listeners over the Internet, and in **podcasting**, streaming or downloading of audio files recorded and stored on distant servers.

First, we'll discuss Web radio. Tens of thousands of "radio stations" exist on the Web in one of two forms: radio simulcasts and bitcasters. *Radio simulcasts* are traditional, over-the-air stations transmitting their signals online. Some simply re-create their original broadcasts, but more often, the simulcast includes additional information, such as song lyrics or artists' biographical information and concert dates. **Bitcasters**, Web-only radio stations, can be accessed only online. There are narrowly targeted bitcasts, such as *NTS.live*, which is based in London and plays underground music, and allworship.com, a Christian station webcasting from Birmingham, Alabama. But the most dramatic evidence of the popularity of bitcasting exists in the success of the scores of **streaming** services that allow the simultaneous downloading and accessing of music.

The most successful streaming services, such as Apple Music, Spotify, and Pandora, are platform agnostic, available on virtually every new digital device—not only the obvious ones such as smartphones, televisions, and car radios, but also the less obvious devices, for example, Wi-Fi-enabled refrigerators (see the discussion of the Internet of Things in **Chapter 13**). Typically, listeners can pay a subscription fee to hear commercial-free music, or they can tune in for free and hear demographic- and taste-specific commercials.

Pandora accomplishes this ad specificity by coupling it with its Music Genome Project. After listeners tell Pandora what artists they like, the Genome Project, according to the company, "will quickly scan its entire world of analyzed music, almost a century of popular recordings— new and old, well known and completely obscure—to find songs with interesting musical similarities to your choice." Listeners can create up to 100 unique "stations," personally refining them even more if they wish, and at any time, they can purchase the tune they are hearing with a simple click.

In 2010 streaming accounted for 10% of music revenues. Today, despite falling *sales* of music in physical and digital formats, industry income is at its highest level in more than a decade, more than $12.2 billion in 2020 in the United States alone, attributed primarily to growth in paid music subscriptions services. Streaming now accounts for 83% of industry revenues (**Smith, 2021**). You can see how streaming dominates the way Americans access their recorded music in **Figure 7.5**.



▲ **Figure 7.5** How Americans Access Recorded Music by Format, 2020.

Source: "Year End Report: U.S. 2020," 2021.
(photo): Dean Drobot/Shutterstock

Podcasts are also streamed, but because they are often posted online, they do not necessarily require streaming software. They can be downloaded, either on demand or automatically (typically by subscription). There are over 2 million US podcasts in operation, triple the number available in 2018 (**Sisario, 2021**).

Today, 104 million Americans listen to at least one podcast every month (**Sisario, 2021**), a number that is likely to grow with the development of app-based podcast services such as CastBox and Stitcher and as smartphones and Bluetooth-enabled cars become even more ubiquitous. Podcast listeners tend to be younger, better educated, and more affluent than the general American population, and they are comfortable with advertising (over a billion dollars a year's worth for the first time in 2021 and likely to top $1.6 billion by 2024; **"Pod-cast," 2021**), ensuring the financial future of the form.

Smartphones, Tablets, and Social Networking Sites

One of radio's distinguishing characteristics, as we've seen, is its portability. Smartphones and tablets reinforce that benefit. For example, more than half of all streaming music listening is mobile, and there are scores of free iPhone and Android music apps. The average American streams more than 15 hours a week of audio on a mobile device (**Edison Research, 2020**).

Much smartphone and tablet listening occurs via social networking sites that play a much more important role in connecting fans to musical artists and their work. Artists themselves are using the Internet in general for their own production, promotion, and distribution, bypassing radio and the recording companies altogether. The most-streamed song of 2019, *Old Town Road*, is one dramatic example. Rap musician Lil Naz X leased its beat from online sample market BeatStars for $30, spent $20 on 30 minutes in an Atlanta recording studio, and uploaded the results to music-centric TikTok. The results: 2.5 billion audio and video streams, the sale of 1.4 million tracks, and a major label contract from Universal (Herman, 2020). Billie Eilish and Maia, who performs as Mxmtoon, are two other young artists among many who have used social media to create their own sounds, maintain artistic and financial control of their careers, and reach tens of millions of fans.



▲ Erykah Badu is only one of the many top-tier music stars to take to Internet streaming to connect with fans.

Ricky Fitchett/ZUMA Wire/Alamy Stock Photo

On Facebook, musicians communicate directly with listeners on fan pages, create and manage their own profiles, offer music apps, and showcase performance events. They use Twitter to reach fans with news and other short notes of interest to keep them involved and encourage retweets to grow the size of their listening community. Instagram, especially since the 2020 introduction of short-video site Reels, and Snapchat serve much the same function but with the benefit of photos and video. TikTok, specializing in short-form mobile videos, is "turning unknowns into stars and obscure songs into hits" (**Pippenger, 2020**). The company maintains an artist-relations team that contacts successful viral musicians and schools them in how to maximize their TikTok reach, backing their commitment with $200 million in support for American artists who show promise (**Bloomberg News, 2020**).

Established stars take advantage of TikTok's popularity (80 million subscribers, 60% between the ages of 16 and 24; **Doyle, 2020**). Before completing what was to become "Toosie Slide," Drake asked TikTok celebrity hip-hop dancer Toosie to create a 15-second dance to the tune's chorus. The video

quickly amassed 3 billion views and the song shot to the top spot on Billboard's single's chart (**Curto, 2020**).

On live-streaming app Periscope, artists can create live audio and video content and broadcast it from their mobile devices anywhere, anytime. And like any other social networking site, Periscope connects fans with one another through sharing and live discussions. Given all this activity, it is not surprising that when the 2020 coronavirus pandemic shut down public performances, artists "moved their gigs online." Celebrity acts like Lizzo, John Legend, and Brandi Carlile performed live concerts, streaming from their homes across a number of sites. Elton John performed from his driveway; Paul McCarthy crooned into his iPhone; and Erykah Badu created her own live stream company to deliver a series of interactive Quarantine Concerts (**Stevens, 2020b**; **Aswad, 2020**).

The Convergence of the Internet and the Recording Industry

In the 1970s, the basis of the recording industry changed from analog to **digital recording**. That is, sound went from being preserved as waves, whether physically on a disc or tape, to conversion into 1s and 0s logged in millisecond intervals in a computerized translation process. When replayed at the proper speed, the resulting sound was not only continuous but pristine—no hum, no hiss. The CD, or compact disc, was introduced in 1983 using digital coding on a 4.7-inch disc read by a laser beam. In 1986 "Brothers in Arms" by Dire Straits became the first million-selling CD. In 1988 the sale of CDs surpassed that of vinyl discs for the first time; by 1999 they accounted for 88% of industry revenues; today, CDs account for only 5.5% of that income (**RIAA, 2020**; **Perry, 2016**).

Convergence with computers and the Internet offers other challenges and opportunities to the recording industry. The way the recording industry operates has been dramatically altered by the Internet. Traditionally, a record company signed an artist, produced the artist's music, and promoted the artist and music through a variety of outlets but primarily through the distribution of music to radio stations. Then listeners, learning about the artist and music through radio, went to a record store and bought the music. But this has changed. Music fans now have access to more music from a greater variety of artists than ever before because of the Internet.

The Internet music revolution began with the development of **MP3**, compression software that shrinks audio files to less than a tenth of their original size. But rather than embrace MP3, the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA), representing all of the United States' major labels, responded to the advance by developing their own "secure" Internet technology, but by the time it was available for release it was too late: MP3, driven by its availability and ease of use, had become the technology of choice for music fans already unhappy with the high cost of CDs and the necessity of paying for tracks they didn't want in order to get the ones they did. Today, the CD is going the way of the audiotape and 8-track cartridge. It has been replaced first by the download, and then by streamed music. Downloading occurs in two forms: industry-approved and **P2P** (peer-to-peer).

Streaming and Downloading

In the early days of Internet music, illegal file sharing proved the popularity of downloading music from the Internet. The major labels combined to offer "approved" music download sites. None did well. They offered downloads by subscription—that is, a certain number of downloads per month for a set fee. In addition, they placed encrypted messages in the tunes that limited how long the song would be playable and where the download could be used and copied. As a result, illegal file sharing continued.

It was Apple's 2003 introduction of its iPod and iTunes Music Store that suggested a better strategy. Although Apple ceased production of the iPod in 2014—largely due to the ubiquity of a far more versatile mobile music device, the smartphone—it had taught fans that they could easily buy and own albums and individual songs for as little as 99 cents.

Though the buying of digital downloads has been in steady decline for years (down 12.5% for albums and 22.3% for singles, 2019 to 2020; **"Year End Report," 2021**), there are still hundreds of legally licensed sites selling tens of millions of different music tracks. Digital download sales surpassed physical sales for the first time in 2011, but today, revenues from the sale of physical products—CDs and vinyl records—actually exceed those from the sale of downloads (**RIAA, 2020**). What the download did to the CD, streaming has done to the download; and while streaming has been a boon for the recording industry itself, it may not have served musicians and music as well, as you can see in the essay "Streaming Saved the Music Industry, But What Did It Do to the Music?"

Streaming may have diminished sales of downloads, but it is influencing the music business in another important way. The ease and inexpensiveness of listening to streamed music has dramatically reduced music **piracy**, the illegal recording and sale of copyrighted material and high-quality recordings (**Smith, 2020b**). Nonetheless, the industry claims that piracy still costs it billions of dollars. Sites such as Gnutella and Freenet use P2P technologies—that is, peer-to-peer software that permits direct Internet-based communication or collaboration between two or more personal computers while bypassing centralized servers. P2P allows users to visit a constantly and infinitely changing network of machines through which file sharing can occur. The record companies (and movie studios) challenged P2P by suing the makers of its software. In 2005's *MGM v. Grokster*, the Supreme Court unanimously supported industry arguments that P2P software, because it "encouraged" copyright infringement, rendered its makers liable for that illegal act.



Among streaming's big winners is Ed Sheeran, who earned $10.1 million in one year from the streaming of a single song.

Matt Jelonek/WireImage/Getty images

The industry's current challenge, then, is **BitTorrent**, file-sharing software that allows anonymous users to create "swarms" of data as they simultaneously download and upload "bits" of a given piece of content from countless untraceable servers. And while these P2P sharing sites account for the large majority of music theft, their share, once as high as 99%, is being eroded by another form of piracy, **stream ripping**—downloading streamed media to a file on a personal device to be accessed locally—

from sites such as YouTube and music streaming sites. The federal government estimates that about 17 million Americans now engage in stream ripping (**Danaher, Smith, & Telang, 2020**), most commonly from sites like FLVTO.biz and **Yout.com**.

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Cultural Forum Blue Column icon, Media Literacy Red Torch Icon, Using Media Green Gear icon, Developing Media book in starburst icon: ©McGraw Hill

Introduction to Chapter 8

About This Chapter

Advertising is the form of active persuasion we are exposed to with the greatest frequency and in the greatest number of different ways. Companies and other organizations are constantly working to change how we think so we are more likely to purchase their products and support their goals, yet we rarely teach students anything about this constant, lifelong onslaught of persuasive messages. The purpose of this chapter is to help change that, helping you to understand the advertising industry and its practices better. This is not just because it's important to be able to evaluate (and sometimes resist) the messages of advertisers, but because our culture is so deeply influenced by advertising. It Is difficult to be a critical consumer of media or an educated member of our society without a deeper understanding of what advertising is, how the industry is structured, and how exactly companies are trying to persuade us.

As the previous chapter indicated, the popularization of radio happened in tandem with the rise of a robust radio advertising industry. While advertising has been around for millennia, and while newspapers and magazines became important advertising mediums during the 1800s, broadcast media like radio allowed advertisers to reach much larger groups of people much faster than ever before. The modern advertising industry arrived as magazines and newspapers became popular, and it came of age around the time radio became a national medium. That's why we're talking about advertising at this stage of the course.

WHAT TO FOCUS ON

Pay attention to this introduction. Not only will you need to understand the ideas in the chapter, you will be asked to identify different examples of advertising techniques. In the chapter itself, focus on the entire history of advertising section. Learn the statistics at the beginning of the "Scope and Nature of the Advertising Industry" section. Pay attention to Figure 3. Focus on the "Regulation of Advertising" section, as well as Figures 4 and 5.

Introductory Information About Advertising

Focus on Critical Thinking: How Does Advertising Work?

Being a consumer of media necessarily also means being a consumer of advertising, and one of the most important things you can do in that role is to learn more about how advertisements work. Specifically, becoming a critical consumer of advertising requires a fuller understanding of the persuasive techniques advertisers use to manipulate us into buying their products. This is not to say that all advertising is necessarily unethical or that it always has negative impacts on us. Advertising can fill an important role in educating us about products and helping us make accurate comparisons and good decisions. However, it is in advertisers' best interests to motivate us to buy their products even if those products are not necessarily what we want, what we need, or even what is good for us. The upcoming chapter focuses mostly on advertising as an *industry*, so it is important to spend some time in this introduction talking about advertising as a persuasive *practice*.

The more aware you are of the strategies and tactics of advertisers, the easier it is to identify particular persuasive appeals and view them critically. Advertisers have probably used thousands of persuasive tactics to manipulate their audiences, and it is not the purpose of this introduction to provide an exhaustive list of every single one. We will, however, discuss a few of the most common advertising techniques in order to equip you with the basic tools you'll need to analyze most of the advertisements you'll encounter.

AWARENESS

The most basic function of advertising is to make you aware of a product's existence. As the upcoming chapter points out, the first human advertising we know about involved people simply shouting out the existence of goods and their prices. This simple understanding of advertising persisted through the initial "publicity" stage of public relations (see the forthcoming chapter on that subject), and awareness is still a primary purpose of advertising. In fact, marketing science professor Byron Sharp reviews the best data available on advertising and concludes that creating awareness is "the dominant way that advertising works."[1] We tend to focus on complicated advertising techniques and innovations, but at the end of the day the one advertising technique that we're absolutely sure works is still awareness, the first and most basic one. Awareness is the primary function of advertising, but that is not to say techniques used by advertisers to create awareness are simple. There are two specific techniques advertisers use within the larger strategy of creating awareness, and understanding how they work helps explain the complexity of advertising's most important function.

Although a lot of attention is paid in advertising textbooks and articles to the idea of differentiation, Byron Sharp's research indicates that what matters most to consumers is product **distinction**—anything that distinguishes the product from its competitors. Unlike differentiation (which we'll talk more about in a moment), what creates product distinction doesn't have to be some quality of the product itself. For consumers, Sharp demonstrates, what matters is that they are able to notice, recognize, and recall the product and/or the brand. So, distinction can be created by the product or brand's name, by colors, logos, symbols, and relatively meaningless taglines ("Coke is it!" or "Just do it!"). Distinction strategies "can be used on packaging and in advertising, in-store displays and sponsorships— they can

be used in any marketing activity where the marketer wants the consumer to be able to identify the brand. This might be to build, refresh or reinforce consumer memory structures or to facilitate purchasing by making the brand easier to locate. The stronger and fresher the links between these distinctive elements and the brand name, the easier it is for the consumer to identify the brand."[2] Think about how important color, for example, is in helping us identify products and brands. When you're at a restaurant looking for sweetener, it only takes a moment to find the packets of Equal brand because they are a distinctive blue. Similarly, John Deere mowers and tractors stand out because of the yellow and green pattern in which they are always painted, and Coca-Cola is easy to spot due to the particular shade of red it uses. Companies recognize the value of these subtle kinds of distinction. Equal, John Deere, and Coca-Cola have all trademarked their colors for use in their specific brand areas, preventing competitors from coopting their strategy of distinction.

A second technique associated with awareness is deeply (and sometimes annoyingly) familiar to every consumer of any kind of media: **repetition**. Advertisers repeat their messages over and over and over again in varying contexts, using multiple methods. Sometimes it seems to the casual media consumer that advertisers must be doing a bad job, wasting resources by showing us ads we have already seen many times before. While that might sometimes be the case, what seems like excessive repetition is probably more of a strategy than an accident. That is because repetition isn't intended to give us nice, comfortable, evenly spaced-out exposures to advertising messages. It's designed to build and then refresh what Sharp calls "**memory structures**." "Memory structures that relate to a brand include what the brand does, what it looks like, where it is available, when and where it is consumed, by who and with whom. Memories are associations with cues that can bring a brand to mind."[3] If a distinct brand makes its way into our memories, then we will notice it when we see it, and we will seek it out when it's time to buy things. Imagine that you are in the cereal aisle of a large grocery store. The options available to you are so numerous that it's hard to even process all the choices. In fact, if you're not already familiar with a brand, you might not even really see it at all—it would just blend in with all the other choices. You have to remember what the box looks like and what the name of the cereal is, and you have to know enough about it to understand where it might be located on the vast range from organic, high fiber, sugar-free granola to the box of Lucky Charms that only contains the marshmallows. That's a lot of information to remember, and most of us don't devote a lot of time to thinking about cereal (or soft drinks or tires or wrist watches or any of the thousands of other products we might need to buy in our lives). Advertisers use repetition to create memories that we will be able to draw on when it comes time for us to think about their products. Sharp calls this "shaping people's brains so that the brand can be seen."[4]

DEMOGRAPHIC TARGETING

Advertising research indicates that awareness is the most important and effective technique for motivating customers. However, that doesn't mean it's the only technique advertisers use. Perhaps the second most common technique—one that dovetails with awareness—is the practice of advertisers using different messages to target groups of potential customers based on their demographic characteristics. Advertisers might create one ad for older consumers, another for those in their 30s, and yet another for children. Messages are designed to appeal to people based on their gender identity, their ethnic identity, their economic class, their geographic location, and a thousand other things. If you watch live sports, for example, you'll see television ads that are targeted to sports fans. And of course we're all becoming familiar with the ability of web sites and apps to track our search histories and buying

habits, and to give us ads that are sometimes so specifically targeted at us as individuals that it's a little creepy. The conventional wisdom is that demographic targeting works because it allows advertisers to craft persuasive appeals that are adapted to a particular audience and that are therefore more likely to succeed. However, it seems more likely that demographic targeting works because it directs attempts to increase awareness at audiences that are most likely to be interested in the product in question. In other words, targeting works not because the ads are persuasive, but because they are reaching audiences who are already primed to buy the specific products being sold. As the Internet makes consumer data collection and analysis easier and more precise, companies are increasingly relying on individual targeting in order to provide consumers with timely reminders of their products' existence. We already receive targeted emails and social media ads reminding us to look for specific brands at times we might want them. It's not hard to imagine a near future in which our phones use our location to remind us that, since we're already at the grocery store, perhaps we might want to know that Oreos are on sale today.

UNIQUE SELLING PROPOSITION

As television rose to prominence in the United States, the power of that medium for advertising became clear. One particularly successful American advertising executive, **Rosser Reeves**, argued that the best way to reach the vast new audience of television viewers was to create advertisements that featured what he called a **unique selling proposition** (USP). A USP is a claim that buying a product will give customers one specific, unique benefit that they find meaningful. Though Reeves coined the term in the early 1960s, the USP remains a central feature of modern advertising theory. It is often referred to as "product differentiation," and is at the heart of the conviction that consumers make decisions between competing brands based on their perception of meaningful differences between products. There is some overlap between the techniques of distinction and differentiation, but they are not the same. Distinction means simply making consumers aware that products are distinct from one another, while **differentiation** means providing consumers a specific reason to choose one product over another. So, distinction techniques help you tell the difference between McDonalds and Wendy's, while a USP might say McDonalds is the better choice because it's cheaper or because its fries are better. When Wendy's first began competing with McDonalds, they had USPs like "our burgers are square" and "our burgers are juicy." Modern advertising research suggests that distinction is vastly more important for consumers than differentiation, but USPs show no signs of decline.

ASSOCIATION

Distinction and differentiation are two of the three most common advertising techniques, but any understanding of modern advertising would be incomplete without the third member of the trinity: association. **Association** is a tactic whereby advertisers teach consumers to attach specific meanings to their brands. Like distinction, association is about establishing mental structures in consumers' brains. Instead of memory, however, association works by creating meaning. It teaches us what goes with what, or perhaps what to think about when we encounter a reference to a brand. If Nike works hard enough at their marketing, for example, when we see their shoes we will think "just do it." When we see a FedEx logo, we will think about fast delivery. Successful association can create durable mental structures, and advertisers are usually aiming at something deeper than simple mental connections. They are attempting "not only to attach meanings to the brands, but to attach brands to meanings, so that when you think of softness and strength, you think Andrex [a brand of toilet paper popular in the UK], when you think sex you think Häagen Dazs ice cream, and when you think sunshine you think

Kellogg's corn flakes. Advertisers want to get consumers to think in these metaphorical ways, to think in images and pictures in which their brands play a leading role."[5] If you doubt the power of this technique consider that some brands have been so successful in associating themselves with their product categories that the name of their brand has become the name of the product itself. Adhesive bandages are BAND-AIDs, facial tissues are Kleenexes, and the verb we use for Internet searches is "Google." Association in these instances is so successful and so powerful that it is almost impossible to think about, for example, bandaging a wound without automatically thinking about the BAND-AID brand.

Companies work to create mental associations between their brand names and all sorts of different things. They use **celebrity endorsements** to encourage us to associate the positive feelings we have about various celebrities with commercial products. Critics often accuse companies that use celebrities in their advertisements of trying to convince consumers that using the product will make them more like the celebrity, but they miss the point. The idea of that kind of association is to get consumers simply to think of the celebrity when they think of the product. If they like the celebrity, they will "learn" to feel good about the associated product because it makes them think of the celebrity, even if they don't actually aspire to be like the spokesperson for the brand. One of the most common forms of association is **status**, where advertisers create linkages between their product and various forms of social and economic prestige. One underlying message, of course, is that using the product helps consumers to gain status. Again, though, the technique will be successful if all it does is make consumers think about status when purchasing or using a product. It is enough for consumers to feel the positive feelings associated with prestige, even if using the product fails at improving their material lives.

Advertisers work hard to associate **social norms and values** with the products they represent. This can take the form of anything from arguing that a company is committed to social responsibility or environmentalism to linking a product with patriotism or a specific political ideology. FoxNews has been wildly successful in part because it associated itself with conservative politics to the point that it is now almost synonymous with them. Companies are strongly motivated to donate to charity in part because they want consumers to associate their brands with philanthropy and doing good deeds in their communities. This sort of association also works in more subtle ways, encouraging us to believe that we need to buy or use specific brands in order to live up to social expectations. Deodorant brands, for example, love to advertise themselves as emblematic of manhood or femininity, and of course countless products over the years have attempted to persuade us that without them we cannot possibly be cool—whatever that means at the time.

Emotional associations are some of the most powerful that companies can create. The tone of most advertisements is designed to create the impression of a specific emotion as a method of building associations between the brand being advertised and the emotion being played out in the ad. This technique involves positive emotions like happiness, excitement, and relaxation, as well as negative emotions. It's not that advertisers want you to be unhappy, for example, when you see a product. Rather, positive emotional associations are created in order to attract you to a product while negative emotions are used to create a sense of desperation and need that only the product can solve. Fear is an incredibly common emotional association in advertising. Think of all the ads for cosmetics that try to convince you that you will look old or ugly if you don't buy a particular cream or use one brand of makeup. And, of course, ads have been playing upon both the positive and negative emotions surrounding sex for a very long time. Excited by the prospect of having sex? You'd better drink this

beer. Worried that your wife might not love you "in that special way" anymore? You'd better get yourself this brand of spray-on hair to cover up your bald spot. Even humor is a form of emotional association. If you think a commercial is funny, you're likely to associate the good feeling of being amused with the brand in the ad.

BANDWAGON APPEALS

Humans tend to enjoy the feeling of being part of a larger group of other people. Bandwagon appeals in advertising play on that desire. Every ad that talks about a product's popularity is using a bandwagon appeal. Think of the number of television ads you've seen where someone sees a group of people talking about something and joins them to figure out what the big deal is. The group explains that they're talking about a product, but our poor main character hasn't ever heard of it. The group is shocked. "You're not using this product?" they ask, horrified, giving the main character a look of disappointment and shame. By the end of the ad the main character is shown using the product or promising to use it. These kinds of narratives not only appeal to our need for inclusion, they show us how bad we'll feel if we don't follow the example set by other consumers of a product. Maybe you're one of those people who dislikes the idea of being part of a group. Don't worry, advertisers have a technique for you too. Companies sometimes find it useful to advertise their products using **anti-bandwagon appeals**, which suggest that using a brand will allow us to separate ourselves from the masses—that our unusual purchase will make us special and distinctive individuals, able to resist the desire to conform. Ironically, this sort of ad works in much the same way as traditional bandwagon appeals. The only real difference is that it is trying to convince us that using a product will allow us to join the "smaller" group of rebels instead of the larger group of conformists.

RELATIONSHIP MARKETING

Perhaps the most popular newer technique in advertising involves attempts by companies to build relationships with their consumers. **Relationship marketing** tries to build long-term relationships with customers that maintain brand awareness, create ongoing and evolving positive brand associations, and ensure customer loyalty. By looking beyond advertising that focuses on one-time purchasing decisions, relationship marketing promotes unique and nuanced forms of advertising aimed at weaving brands into customers' broader lives. Consider the number of companies that maintain active social media accounts. Because companies are trying to create relationships, social media accounts often become places where customers can interact directly with corporate spokespeople. In some cases, social media provide opportunities for companies to involve themselves in their customers' lives in ways that aren't directly related to purchasing decisions. For example, Wendy's Twitter account has become well known for its snarky attitude and its tendency to insert itself into conversations involving other companies. Social media users now follow Wendy's on Twitter for the entertainment value, expanding their relationship with the company far beyond any transitory desire for burgers or chicken nuggets. This is exactly the sort of thing companies are looking to accomplish via relationship marketing—to make themselves a part of consumers' lives regardless of whether consumers are actively considering purchasing their products. Many entertainers have adopted the practice of forming clubs (or creating memberships) for their followers. By joining the club (or signing up for the website or subscribing to the YouTube channel or whatever), fans can get access to special deals, merchandise, and performances. This gives consumers the feeling that they are in a special relationship with their favorite celebrities (or even brands), making them more likely to purchase their products and take part in their performances.

What to Study

KEY WORDS

Awareness, distinction, repetition, memory structures

Demographic targeting

Unique Selling Proposition, differentiation

Association (and all the ways that technique is used)

Bandwagon appeals, anti-bandwagon appeals

Relationship marketing

Clutter, ambient/360 advertising, experiential marketing

Siquis, shopbills

National Advertising Review Board

Consumer culture

Advertising (definition on p. 298)

FTC

FCC

Puffery

Return on investment

Engagement

Permission Marketing

IMPORTANT PEOPLE

Rosser Reeves

Volney B. Palmer

F. Wayland Ayer

QUESTIONS YOU SHOULD BE ABLE TO ANSWER

- What are the major advertising techniques described in the introduction? Which are the most popular and the most effective?
- What is the difference between distinction, differentiation, and association? Which one does research indicate is the most important?
- What are the various kinds of association techniques practiced by advertisers?
- What are the goals of relationship marketing, and why?
- Roughly how many ads do we typically encounter a day? What about the number of daily interactions with brands?
- How old is advertising as a human practice, as far as we know?
- What was the advertising business like in the US before the Civil War? After the war? What was the impact of industrialization on the US advertising industry?
- When did the first full service advertising agency arrive? What distinguished it from previous "space broker" agencies?
- During the early years after the arrival of ad agencies, what three factors motivated the industry to establish professional standards and regulate itself?
- In what three major ways was radio important to advertising?
- What impact did the stock market crash in 1929 have on advertising revenues? What did the advertising industry do during
  WWII? What happened to the industry after WWII? What was the growth of television advertising spending between 1949 and 1951?
- What four arguments are typically made in defense of advertising? What four specific complaints do critics normally have about advertising?
- What percentage of American high school students attend schools that allow on-campus food advertising? What percentage of American elementary students?
- How much money does the advertising industry spend on ads each year, both in the U.S. and globally? How many ad agencies are there in the U.S.? 8 of the top 10 ad agencies (ranked by revenue) are in what one city in the world? How many of those ad agencies are owned by non-U.S. companies?
- What are the most popular mediums in term of U.S. ad spending? Where do newspapers and magazines rank in that list?
- What are the three governmental entities that regulate advertising, and what do they each do?
- Legally speaking, what makes an advertisement false?
- What 3 individual companies earn the most income from digital ad revenue in the U.S.?

NOTES

1. Sharp, Byron. *How Brands Grow*. Apple Books, revised e-book version, 2014, p. 204.
2. Sharp, p. 184.
3. Sharp, p. 205.
4. Sharp, p. 205.

5. Brierly, Sean. *The Advertising Handbook.* Routledge, 1995, p. 139.

Advertising

8



Does ambient advertising cut through the clutter or add to it?

ACORN 1/Alamy Stock Photo

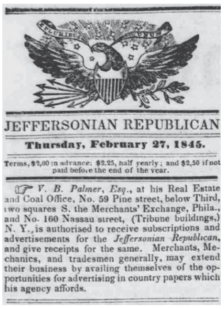
1625 ▶ First newsbooks with ads
1735 Ben Franklin sells ad space in *Pennsylvania Gazette*

1800



Hulton Archive/Getty Images

1841 ▶ Palmer begins first ad agency


JEFFERSONIAN REPUBLICAN
Thursday, February 27, 1845.
Terms, $1,00 in advance; $2,25, half yearly; and $2,50 if not paid before the end of the year.
☞ *V. B. Palmer, Esq.*, at his Real Estate and Coal Office, No. 59 Pine street, below Third, two squares S. the Merchants' Exchange, Phila., and No. 160 Nassau street, (Tribune buildings,) N. Y., is authorised to receive subscriptions and advertisements for the *Jeffersonian Republican*, and give receipts for the same. Merchants, Mechanics, and tradesmen generally, may extend their business by availing themselves of the opportunities for advertising in country papers which his agency affords.
Library of Congress

1850

1869 Ayer begins first full-service ad agency
1880s ▶ Brands appear



Science History Images/Alamy Stock Photo

1900

1914 Federal Trade Commission established
1922 First radio commercial
1923 *The Eveready Hour,* first regularly broadcast sponsored series
1936 Consumers Union established
1938 Wheeler-Lea Act
1941 ▶ War Advertising Council (Ad Council) founded
1948 Television to the public



Fotosearch/Archive Photos/Getty Images

1950

1957 Packard's *The Hidden Persuaders*
1959 Quiz show scandal
1971 National Advertising Review Board established; TV cigarette commercial ban
1994 First banner ad; spam appears


Scott Dunlap/iStock/Getty Images

2000

2008 Internet ad spending exceeds radio's
2009 Internet ad spending exceeds magazines'
2012 ▶ Internet ad spending exceeds all print advertising; tobacco companies ordered to run corrective ads
2013 Pay-for-performance deals now in majority of agency–client contracts
2016 Internet ad spending exceeds TV's; online purchases exceed in-store purchases; Trustworthy Accountability Group
2017 Coalition for Better Ads formed
2018 Advertising Protection Bureau established; Facebook and Twitter unveil ad verification protocols
2019 Advertising Research Foundation's Member Code of Conduct
2020 Coronavirus in the US; digital accounts for more than half of US ad spending; global out-of-home ad spending exceeds newspaper ad spending
2021 Ad Council's *It's Up to You* campaign


Creative Crop/Digital Vision/Getty Images

YOUR ROOMMATES, BOTH ADVERTISING MAJORS, CHALLENGE YOU



▲ Even in death, it's difficult to avoid advertising.

Susan Baran

"We bet you $20 that you can't go all of tomorrow without seeing an ad." You think, "I'll just stay away from radio and television—no problem, considering I stream music and I have tons of homework to do." That leaves newspapers and magazines, but you can avoid their ads simply by not reading either for 24 hours. Online ads? You'll simply stay offline. Facebook and Twitter? You can survive a day friendless and unfollowed. "What about billboards?" you counter.

"We won't count them," your roomies graciously concede, "but everything else is in."

You shake hands and go to bed planning your strategy. This means no cereal in the morning—the Cheerios box has a Chiquita Banana ad on it. There'll be no bus to school. Not only are the insides packed with ads, but a lot of buses are now covered in vinyl wraps that turn them into gigantic rolling commercials. Can't walk either. There are at least two ad kiosks on the way. It'll cost you close to $20 to get an Uber, but this is about winning the bet, not about money. Uber it will be! You sleep well, confident victory will be yours.

The next evening, over pizza, you hand over your $20.

"What was it?," asks one of your friends. "Sneak a peek at TV?"

"No," you say, and then you begin the list: The Uber driver was listening to a country music station that ran near-nonstop commercials for McDonald's breakfast sandwiches. Escaping that, you stepped out of the car onto the sidewalk near campus, which had the stenciled message "From here it looks like you could use some new underwear—Bamboo Lingerie" in water-soluble iridescent red paint. The restrooms on campus have Volkswagen ads pasted on their walls. Your ATM receipt carried an ad for a brokerage firm. You encountered a Domino's Pizza ad on the back of the receipt you got at the grocery store, the kiwi you bought there had a sticker on it reminding you to buy Snapple, and the shopping basket had a realtor's pitch pasted to the side—even the little rubber bar you used to separate your kiwi and mineral water from the groceries of the shopper in front of you had an ad on each of its four sides.

"Easiest $20 we ever made," your roommates gloat.

In this chapter we examine the history of advertising, focusing on its maturation with the coming of industrialization and the Civil War. The development of the advertising agency and the rise of

professionalism within its ranks are detailed, as is the impact of magazines, radio, World War II, and television.

We discuss the relationship between consumers and contemporary advertising in terms of how advertising agencies are structured, how various types of advertising are aimed at different audiences, and the trends—converging technologies, audience segmentation, and globalization—that promise to alter those relationships.

We study the controversies that surround the industry. Critics charge that advertising is intrusive (3 out of 4 of us consciously try to avoid advertising; **Bretous, 2021**), deceptive, inherently unethical when aimed at children, and corrupting of the culture. We look at industry defenses, too.

Finally, in the media literacy skills section, we discuss advertisers' use of intentional imprecision and how to identify and interpret it.

A Short History of Advertising

Your roommates had the advantage. They know that American advertisers and marketers spend hundreds of billions of dollars a year trying to get your attention and influence your decisions. They also know that you typically encounter between 6,000 and 10,000 ads a day (Carr, 2021), unless they're considering marketing messages in general (across all media on all platforms, including when you open the refrigerator and see all those brand labels and when you're passed by all those cars with their manufacturers' logos), in which case you have closer to 4 million daily interactions with brands (Kivijarv, 2018).



▲ Unwilling to waste a good pandemic, Walmart and several of its brand partners teamed up to offer branded COVID-19 vaccine sites. Advertising is indeed everywhere.

David J. Griffin/Icon Sportswire/Getty Images

There are a lot of ads and a lot of advertisers. Almost everyone in the ad business complains about commercial **clutter**, yet, in the words of *Advertising Age* writer Matthew Creamer (2007), "Like a fly repeatedly bouncing off a closed window, the ad industry is trying to fix the problem by doing more of the same. That is, by creating more ads" (p. 1). Sometimes "more ads" literally means "more ads," for example television networks' increased use of **blinks**, 1- or 2-second commercials interspersed between more traditional commercials (Deighton, 2020). Often "more ads" takes the form of **ambient advertising**, sometimes referred to as **360 marketing**, and by whatever name, they are showing up in some fairly nontraditional settings. This is because advertisers know that "we, the public, are so good at avoiding or ignoring traditional advertising. We are fickle fish, cynical creatures who have already been hooked so many times that the simpler lures no longer work" (Wu, 2016).

There seems to be no limit to how and where we find ads. The rPlate looks like a traditional automobile license plate when a vehicle is moving, but it becomes a digital billboard when it is parked, its message targeted to its location. Google offers technology that lets advertisers subsidize self-driving car passengers' rides in exchange for watching their ads en route, and there is tech that lets those advertisers suggest detours to their businesses mid-ride. During the pandemic, people who made their Burger King orders online received a custom-printed version of that order written on a face mask. When they arrived at the restaurant, no need to talk; and of course they then sported a new mask with a prominent Burger King logo. We find ads in outer space, as NASA astronauts aboard the International Space Station record themselves using Estée Lauder skincare products for use in the company's ad campaigns.

Radio, concert promotion, and outdoor ad company Clear Channel Outdoor maintains a separate Branded Cities division in the business of turning locations—parks, city centers, specific streets—into destinations where people can go for all kinds of activities into which brands can be integrated, a practice called **experiential marketing**, the melding of brands and experiences. Other examples include Busch Beer's pop-up bars in the middle of national forests, Universal Music's chain of music-based experiential destinations, UMUSIC Hotels, and Taco Bell's 4-day takeover of a Palm Springs hotel, transforming it into The Bell: A Taco Bell Hotel & Resort. And of course, folks at these "branded experiences" become commercial creators themselves, brand marketers capturing the goings-on with their phones and sharing them across social media, making even more clutter. We see ads on door hangers, on urinal deodorant cakes, in the mail, behind the batter at a baseball game, and on basketball backboards in city parks. We use digital ad-screen hand driers in public restrooms. It wasn't always like this, but advertising itself has been with us for a long time.

Early Advertising

Babylonian merchants hired barkers to shout out goods and prices at passersby in 3000 b.c.e. The Romans wrote announcements on city walls. This ad was discovered in the ruins of Pompeii:

> The Troop of Gladiators of the Aedil
>
> Will fight on the 31st of May
>
> There will be fights with wild animals
>
> And an Awning to keep off the sun. (**Berkman & Gilson, 1987**, p. 32)

By the 15th century, ads as we know them now were abundant in Europe. **Siquis**—pinup want ads for all sorts of products and services—were common. Tradespeople promoted themselves with **shopbills**—attractive, artful business cards. Taverners and other merchants were hanging eye-catching signs above their businesses. In 1625 the first **newsbook** containing ads, *The Weekly News*, was printed in England. From the beginning, those who had products and services to offer used advertising.



▲ This narrow street in Salzburg, Austria, still exhibits evidence of early European advertising, which often took the form of artistically designed signs announcing the nature of the business below.

Siepmann/imageBROKER/age fotostock



▲ This early-18th-century tobacco label shows that the British had already mastered the use of celebrities in their advertising.

Hulton Archive/Getty Images

Advertising came to the colonies via England. British advertising was already leaning toward exaggeration and hyperbole, but colonial advertising was more straightforward. Ben Franklin sold advertising space in his *Pennsylvania Gazette*, and this 1735 ad is a typical example for the time:

> A Plantation containing 300 acres of good Land, 30 cleared, 10 or 12 Meadow and in good English Grass, a house and barn & c. [creek] lying in Nantmel Township, upon French-Creek, about 30 miles from Philadelphia. Inquire of Simon Meredith now living on the said place. (**Sandage, Fryburger, & Rotzoll, 1989**, p. 21)

Advertising, however, was a small business before the Civil War. The United States was primarily an agricultural country at that time, with 90% of the population living in self-sufficiency on farms. Advertising was used by local retailers primarily to encourage area residents to come to their businesses. The local newspaper was the major advertising medium.

Industrialization and the Civil War

The Industrial Revolution and the Civil War altered the social and cultural landscape and brought about the expansion of advertising. By the 1840s, the telegraph made communication over long distances possible. Railroads linked cities and states. Huge numbers of immigrants were welcomed to

the United States to provide labor for the expanding factories. Manufacturers wanted access to larger markets for their goods. Advertising copywriter Volney B. Palmer recognized in 1841 that merchants needed to reach consumers beyond their local newspaper readership. He contacted several Philadelphia newspapers and agreed to broker the sale of space between them and interested advertisers. Within 4 years Palmer had expanded his business to Boston, and in 1849, he opened a branch in New York. The advertising agency had been invented.

The Civil War sped industrialization. More factories were needed to produce war material, and roads and railroads were expanded to move that material, as well as the troops. As farmworkers went to war or to work in the new factories, more farm machinery was needed to compensate for their departure. That meant that more factories were needed to make more machinery, and the cycle repeated.

By the early 1880s, the telephone and the electric light had been invented. That decade saw numerous innovations in manufacturing as well as an explosion in the type and availability of products. In the year 1880 alone, there were applications for more than 13,000 US copyrights and patents. Over 70,000 miles of new railroad track were laid in the 1880s, linking cities and towns of all sizes. With more producers chasing the growing purchasing power of more consumers, manufacturers were forced to differentiate their products—to literally and figuratively take the pickle out of the barrel and put it in its own recognizable package. And so brands were born: Quaker Oats, Ivory Soap, Royal Baking Powder, and many more. What advertisers now needed was a medium in which to tell people about these brands.

Magazine Advertising



Magazines provided the first national medium for advertisers. Here is an imaginative ad for the still popular Pears' soap.

Library of Congress, (LC-USZ62-84425)

The expansion of the railroads, the rise in literacy, and advantageous postal rates fueled the explosive growth of the popular magazine just before the end of the 19th century. The marriage of magazines and advertising was natural. Cyrus H. K. Curtis, who founded the *Ladies' Home Journal* in 1883, told a group of manufacturers:

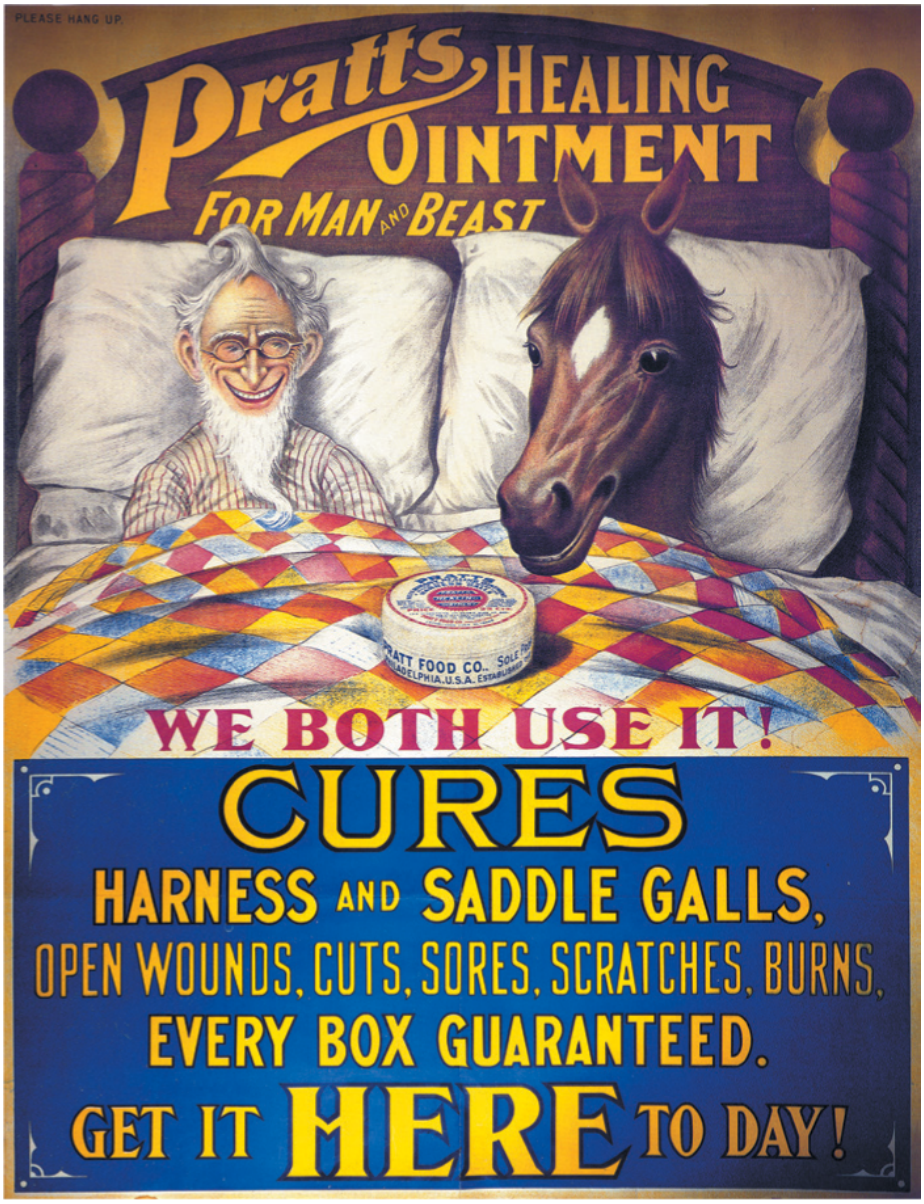
> The editor of the *Ladies' Home Journal* thinks we publish it for the benefit of American women. This is an illusion, but a very proper one for him to have. The real reason, the publisher's reason, is to give you who manufacture things American women want, a chance to tell them about your product. (in **Sandage et al., 1989**, p. 32)

By the turn of the century, magazines were financially supported primarily by their advertisers rather than by their readers, and aspects of advertising we find common today—creativity in look and language, mail-order ads, seasonal ads, and placement of ads in proximity to content of related interest—were already in use (see **Chapter 5** for more on magazines).

The Advertising Agency and Professionalism

In the years between the Civil War and World War I, advertising had rapidly become more complex, more creative, and more expensive, and it was conducted on a larger scale. Advertising agencies had to expand their operations to keep up with demand. Where Palmer offered merely to broker the sale of newspaper space, F. Wayland Ayer began his "full service" advertising agency in 1869, N. W. Ayer and Sons. He provided clients with ad campaign planning, created and produced ads with his staff of artists and writers, and placed them in the most appropriate media. At a time when women wanted their future husbands to buy them a washing machine rather than an engagement ring ("money down the drain"), Ayer's work for the De Beers mining company upended that priority, giving the world "A diamond is forever," an ad slogan still used today (**Caesar, 2020**, p. 34). Several big agencies still operating today started at this time, including J. Walter Thompson, William Esty, and Lord & Thomas.

During this period, three factors combined to motivate the advertising industry to establish professional standards and to regulate itself. First was the reaction of the public and the medical profession to the abuses of patent medicine advertisers. These charlatans used fake claims and medical data in their ads to sell tonics that at best were useless and, at worst, deadly. The second was the critical examination of most of the country's important institutions, led by the muckrakers (see **Chapter 5**). The third factor was the establishment in 1914 of the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), which had among its duties monitoring and regulating advertising. As a result, a number of leading advertising agencies and publishers mounted a crusade against gross exaggeration, false testimonials, and other misleading forms of advertising. The Audit Bureau of Circulations was established to verify circulation claims. The Advertising Federation of America (now the American Advertising Federation), the American Association of Advertising Agencies, the Association of National Advertisers, and the Outdoor Advertising Association all began operation at this time.



▲ Reaction to the deception and outright lies of patent medicine advertising—such as this 1880 piece for Pratts Healing Ointment—led to important efforts to professionalize the industry.

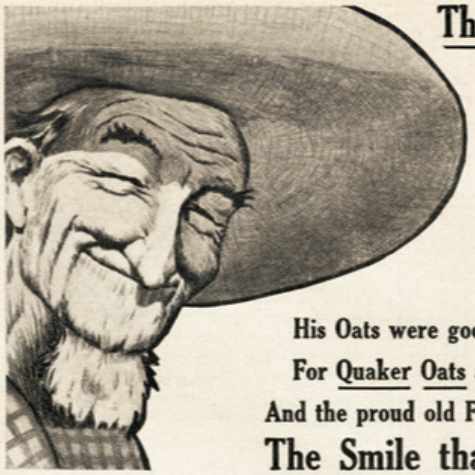
Science History Images/Alamy Stock Photo

Advertising and Radio

The first radio ad was broadcast on WEAF in 1922 (the cost was $50 for a 10-minute spot). Radio was important to advertising in three major ways. First, although many people both inside and outside government were opposed to commercial support for the new medium, the general public had no great opposition to radio ads. In fact, in the prosperous Roaring Twenties, many welcomed them; advertising seemed a natural way to keep radio "free." Second, advertising agencies virtually took over broadcasting, producing the shows in which their commercials appeared. The ad business became

show business. The 1923 variety show *The Eveready Hour*, sponsored by a battery maker, was the first regularly broadcast sponsored series. Ad agency Blackett-Sample-Hummert even developed a new genre for its client Procter & Gamble—the soap opera. Third, money now poured into the industry. That income was used to expand research and marketing on a national scale, allowing advertisers access to sophisticated nationwide consumer and market information for the first time. The wealth that the advertising industry accrued from radio permitted it to survive during the Depression.

The Depression did have its effect on advertising, however. The stock market crashed in 1929, and by 1933 advertising had lost nearly two-thirds of its revenues. Among the responses were the hard sell—making direct claims about why a consumer *needed* a product—and a tendency away from honesty. At the same time, widespread unemployment and poverty bred a powerful consumer movement. The Consumers Union, which still publishes *Consumer Reports*, was founded in 1936 to protect people from unscrupulous manufacturers and advertisers. And in 1938 Congress passed the Wheeler–Lea Act, granting the FTC extended powers to regulate advertising.



The Farmer's Smile

His Oats were good enough to mill
For Quaker Oats at Quaker Mill—
And the proud old Farmer's smiling still
The Smile that won't come off.

Here's Food Value No Other Oatmeal Boasts

Here's richer flavor—extra nourishment —from the exclusive Quaker★ process

DO you know the difference there is between oatmeals? We have made an oatmeal so delicious that it is preferred above all others.

Quaker Oats are flaked from just the finest, *plumpest* grains. It takes 32 siftings to discard all but the choicest, plumpest oats. In other words, a bushel (thirty-two pounds) of good oats, yields but ten pounds of Quaker Oats.

Why Quaker Oats are more nourishing than other oatmeals

Then the selected oat kernels are roasted whole, roasted to a supremely delicious flavor. They are then further enriched with modern ultra violet rays. This gives added food value no other oatmeal provides.

This is what we mean when we say there's no other oatmeal like Quaker.

Faster than Toast or Coffee

Quaker made the first fast cooking oatmeal. It cooks faster than toast or coffee. Others have imitated Quick Quaker Oats. But none have succeeded in copying the rich savory flavor.

Bring children to a love of this great natural food by serving Quaker Oats . . . the oatmeal with the extra flavor . . . extra nourishment. Then watch the whole family smile at breakfast.

★ **Quaker Oats is purer, richer, better, because of the exclusive Quaker process which includes:**

1—The use of choicest oats.
2—Better flavor due to 10 different roastings.
3—Further enrichment by the use of modern ultra violet rays.

U. S. Patent No. 1,680,818

NRA MEMBER

Quick Quaker Oats



▲ A 1930s hard-sell ad from Quaker Oats oatmeal. The hard sell made its debut during the Great Depression as advertisers worked to attract the little consumer money that was available.

f8 archive/Alamy Stock Photo

World War II

The Second World War, so important in the development of all the mass media, had its impact on advertising, as well. Production of consumer products came to a near halt during the war (1941–1945), and traditional advertising was limited. The advertising industry turned its collective skills toward the war effort, and what product advertising that there was typically adopted a patriotic theme.

In 1941, several national advertising and media associations joined to develop the War Advertising Council. The council used its expertise to promote numerous government programs. Its best-known campaign, however, was on behalf of the sale of war bonds. The largest campaign to date for a single item, the war bond program helped sell 800 million bonds, totaling $45 billion. When the war ended, the group, now called the Advertising Council, directed its efforts toward a host of public service campaigns on behalf of countless nonprofit organizations (see the essay "Effecting Positive Social Change"). Most of us have read or heard, "This message is brought to you by the Ad Council."

The impact of World War II on the size and structure of the advertising industry was significant. A high excess-profits tax was levied on manufacturers' wartime profits that exceeded prewar levels. The goal was to limit war profiteering and ensure that companies did not benefit too greatly from the death and destruction of war. Rather than pay the heavy tariff, manufacturers reduced their profit levels by putting income back into their businesses. Because the lack of raw materials made expansion or recapitalization difficult, many companies invested in corporate image advertising. They may not have had products to sell to the public, but they knew that the war would end someday and that stored-up goodwill would be important. One result, therefore, was an expansion in the number and size of manufacturers' advertising departments and of advertising agencies. A second result was a public primed by that advertising for the return of consumer goods.



◂ Consumer products go to war. Advertisers and manufacturers joined the war effort. This magazine-ad GI is enjoying the comforts of a holiday home—wife, child, and a cold Coke or two.

Fotosearch/Archive Photos/Getty Images

Advertising and Television

There was no shortage of consumer products when the war ended. The nation's manufacturing capacity had been greatly expanded to meet the needs of war, but afterward, that manufacturing capability was turned toward the production of consumer products for people who found themselves with more leisure time and more money. People were also having more children and, thanks to the GI Bill, were able to think realistically about owning homes. They wanted products to enhance their leisure, please their children, and fill their houses.

Advertising was well positioned to put products and people together, not only because agencies had expanded during the war but also because of television. Radio's formats, stars, and network structure had moved wholesale to the new medium. Television soon became the primary national advertising medium. Advertisers bought $12 million in television time in 1949; two years later they spent $128 million.

USING MEDIA TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Effecting Positive Social Change

Advertising can often lead people to do good, and there is no better example of this than the work of the Ad Council, whose mission since 1942 has been to use advertising to bring about beneficial social change. Has it succeeded in making a difference? Who are Smokey Bear, Rosie the Riveter, McGruff the Crime Dog, the Crash Test Dummies, and the Crying Indian (Chief Iron Eyes Cody)? All are creations of the Ad Council. And of course, you are aware that friends don't let friends drive drunk and that love has no labels. You certainly understand when to just say no and that a mind is a terrible thing to waste. You know these things because of Ad Council campaigns.

Can the ability of the Ad Council to make a difference be quantified? Consider the following:

- Applications for mentors rose from 90,000 a year to 620,000 in the first nine months after the start of its campaign for Big Brothers Big Sisters.
- The number of parents willing to talk to a doctor about their child's autism doubled with the introduction in 2019 of the Autism Awareness campaign.
- Thirty thousand American kids eight years old and over have been adopted since the 2004 start of the "AdoptUSKids" campaign. (**"A Focus," 2021**)

The Ad Council typically has 35 to 40 active public service campaigns running at one time, and it is able to secure about $2 billion a year in donated time and space from 28,000 different media outlets. The Ad Council does not shy away from controversial issues. In the 1970s it took on sexually transmitted infections with its "VD Is for Everyone" campaign, an effort attacked by many religious groups, and many broadcasters refused to air its "Help Stop AIDS. Use a Condom" spots in 1987. Its 2015 "Love Has No Labels" campaign challenged racism, homophobia, and intolerance.

And although wearing face masks during the corona-virus pandemic should never have been controversial, it was. Nonetheless, the Ad Council released its "You Will See Me" campaign to encourage people of color, disproportionately affected by the virus, to wear the potentially life-saving protection. Then, with a full third of Americans saying that they were unwilling to receive the COVID19 vaccine, the Ad Council assembled more than 300 major brands, media companies, community-based organizations, and

other organizations into its “It’s Up to You” campaign, the largest single public service campaigns in history (Faw, 2021).

The Ad Council is able to make a difference because dozens of ad agencies, big and small, donate their time, energy, and creativity. One ad executive reportedly claimed that he never sees a pitch reel that doesn’t contain at least one Ad Council campaign (Crain, 2016, p. 38).

Television commercials, by virtue of the fact that consumers could see and hear the product in action, were different from the advertising of all other media.

Ads were offering little information about the product, yet people were increasing their spending. This led to growing criticism of advertising and its contribution to the consumer culture (more on this controversy later in the chapter). The immediate impact was the creation of an important vehicle of industry self-regulation. In response to mounting criticism in books such as *The Hidden Persuaders* (Packard, 1957) and concern over increasing scrutiny from the FTC, the industry in 1971 established the National Advertising Review Board (NARB) to monitor potentially deceptive advertising. The NARB, the industry’s most important self-regulatory body, investigates consumer complaints as well as complaints made by an advertiser’s competitors.

Advertising and Its Audiences

The typical individual living in the United States will spend more than 1 year of his or her life just watching television commercials. It is a rare moment when we are not in the audience of some ad or commercial. This is one of the many reasons advertisers have begun to place their messages in many venues beyond the traditional commercial media, as we saw earlier, hoping to draw our attention. We confront so many ads every day that we overlook them, and they become invisible. As a result, many people become aware of advertising only when it somehow offends them.



▲ Among the earliest demonstration ads, Timex took many a licking but kept on ticking.

Courtesy of The Advertising Archives

Criticisms and Defenses of Advertising

Advertising does sometimes offend, and it is often the focus of criticism. However, industry defenders argue the following:

- Advertising supports our economic system; without it, new products could not be introduced and developments in others could not be announced. Competitive advertising of new products and businesses powers the engine of our economy, fostering economic growth and creating jobs in many industries.
- People use advertising to gather information before making buying decisions.

- Ad revenues make possible the "free" mass media we use not only for entertainment but also for the maintenance of our democracy.
- By showing us the bounty of our capitalistic, free enterprise society, advertising increases national productivity (as people work harder to acquire more of these products) and improves the standard of living (as people actually acquire more of these products).

The first defense is a given. Ours is a capitalistic society whose economy depends on the exchange of goods and services. Complaints, then, have less to do with the existence of advertising than with its conduct and content, and they are not new. At the 1941 founding meeting of the Advertising Council, J. Walter Thompson executive James Webb Young argued that such a public service commitment would go far toward improving the public's negative attitude toward his industry. He described it as "a sort of repugnance for the manifestations of advertising—or its banality, its bad taste, its moronic appeals, and its clamor" (quoted in **"Story of the Ad Council," 2001**).

The second defense assumes that advertising provides information, but much—critics would say most—advertising is devoid of useful information. Rarely does consumer advertising tout the functional benefits of a product or service (**demonstrative advertising**) because marketers know well that rather than products, people buy the lifestyles, experiences, and emotions associated with those products; so **associative advertising**—this product is associated with these lifestyle ideals—dominates.

The third defense assumes that the only way media can exist is through commercial support, but many nations around the world have built fine media systems without heavy advertiser support (see **Chapter 13**). To critics of advertising, the fourth defense—that people work hard only to acquire more things and that our standard of living is measured by the material things we have—draws an unflattering picture of human nature.

Specific Complaints

Specific complaints about advertising are that it is often intrusive, deceptive, and, in the case of children's advertising, inherently unethical. Advertising is also said to demean or corrupt the culture.

ADVERTISING IS INTRUSIVE

Many critics fault advertising for its intrusiveness. Advertising is everywhere; it interferes with and alters our experience. Giant wall advertisements change the look of cities. Ads beamed by laser light onto night skies destroy evening stargazing. School learning aids provided by candy makers asking students to "count the Tootsie Rolls" alter education. Constant commercials diminish the television-viewing experience, so much so that *fewer* commercials actually produce greater program popularity and advertising effectiveness (**Friedman, 2020**).

Many Internet users once believed that "targeted advertising would be a blessing for consumers. That vision has soured and even seems like a bad joke given how plagued we are by the rise of stealth advertising, the invasions of privacy, the proliferation of click bait and stalking advertising, and the general degradation of much of the web" (**Wu, 2016**, p. 21). Today, 90% of people online believe that Internet advertising is obtrusive (**Bukhari, 2020**). That's why more than 527 million people globally block ads on their mobile devices and 236 million block on their desktops (**Slefo, 2020**). You can see what prompts people to block ads in **Figure 8.1**.

Too many ads	48%
Ads are annoying or irrelevant	47%
Ads are too intrusive	44%
Ads contain viruses or bugs	38%
Ads take up too much screen space	38%
Ads slow down page-load times	33%
Ads compromise online privacy	26%
To stop using up data	23%
To stop battery drain	23%
To avoid ad personalization	22%

▲ **Figure 8.1** Top Motivations for Ad Blocking.

Source: ***Baum, 2019***.

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Hoping to protect the Internet as an otherwise valuable advertising medium, a collection of the Internet's biggest companies and biggest advertisers formed the Coalition for Better Ads in 2017 to promote industry-wide, self-imposed ad blocking for digital ads considered the most annoying by users—for example, pop-up ads, auto-play ads with sound, flashing animation, and countdown ads that force users to wait to access sites. Many sites also practice **frequency capping**, limiting the number of times a user sees the same commercial message in a given period of time.

ADVERTISING IS DECEPTIVE

Many critics say that much advertising is inherently deceptive in that it implicitly and sometimes explicitly promises to improve people's lives through the consumption or purchase of a sponsor's products. Communication researchers Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Karlyn Campbell (1997) described this as the "If . . . then" strategy: "A beautiful woman uses a certain brand of lipstick in the ad, and men follow her everywhere. Without making the argument explicit, the ad implies that if you use this product you will be beautiful, and if you are beautiful (or use this product), you will be more attractive to men" (p. 242). They called the opposite strategy "If not . . . then not." When Hallmark says, "When you care enough to send the very best," the implication is that when you do not send Hallmark, you simply do not care.

Advertising promises health, long life, sexual success, wealth, companionship, popularity, and acceptance. Industry defenders argue that people understand and accept these as allowable exaggerations, not as deception, yet 84% of Millennials say they do not like traditional advertising, nor do they trust it (**Metev, 2020**).

ADVERTISING EXPLOITS CHILDREN

Because they now spend more time on video games and streaming television (which, as you've already read, have their own means of advertising to kids), contemporary American children are seeing fewer TV commercials for unhealthy food and soft drinks as well as those for gambling and alcohol than they were just a few years ago. But that new number still exceeds more than 161 a week (**Watson, 2019**). Countries such as Norway and Sweden, on the other hand, completely ban television ads aimed at kids, as does Chile and the Canadian province of Quebec. Ads and commercialism are increasingly invading schools—90% of American high school students and 70% of American elementary school students attend schools that allow on-campus food advertising, 90% of which is for soda, sports drinks, and other beverages (**Morrison, 2014**). Companies spend nearly $20 billion a year targeting children, with a quarter of that amount spent touting "mostly unhealthy products." Not only can a typical first grader recognize 200 logos, but kids aged 3 to 5 show recognition rates as high as 92% for 50 different brands in 16 product categories—McDonald's was most recognizable—demonstrating that children as young as 3 can readily recognize the brands they see advertised (**Andronikidis & Lambrianidou, 2010**; **Rettner, 2013**).

Critics contend that children are simply not intellectually capable of interpreting the intent of these ads, nor are they able before the age of 7 or 8 to rationally judge the worth of the advertising claims. This makes children's advertising inherently unethical. Television advertising to kids is especially questionable because children consume it in the home—with implicit parental approval, and most often without parental supervision. Ad critics ask the following question: "If parents would never allow living salespeople to enter their homes to sell their children products, why do they allow the most sophisticated salespeople of all to do it every day on home screens they, the parents themselves, provided?"

According to the **Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood (2021**), this early and constant exposure to advertising "designed first-and-foremost to build brand loyalty, sell licensed products, and capture [their] attention for advertisers," produces kids who "interact with peers and adults mostly via commercial technology or screen-based play" and that "play is driven by branded toys, media, and storylines." They cease to be children, but rather "a mass market. . .valued for what they can spend (or nag their parents to spend)" on "toys, clothes, and other products [that] are hypergendered and gender-segregated, because more products means more profits." Inevitably, their "values are shaped by marketing messages."



▲ Advertising in schools and on educational material is now common—and quite controversial. Ads adorn school buses, gymnasiums, report cards, and more.

RJ Sangosti/The Denver Post/Getty Images

The particular issue of fast-food and snack advertising to children is the subject of the essay "Kids' Advertising: Is Self-Regulation Enough?"

ADVERTISING DEMEANS AND CORRUPTS CULTURE

In our culture, we value beauty, kindness, prestige, family, love, and success. As human beings, we need food, shelter, and the maintenance of the species—in other words, sex. Advertising succeeds by appealing to these values and needs. The basis for this persuasive strategy is the **AIDA approach**—to persuade consumers, advertising must attract *attention*, create *interest*, stimulate *desire*, and promote *action* (**Medhora, 2020**). According to industry critics, however, problems arise when important aspects of human existence are reduced to the consumption of brand-name consumer products. Freedom is choosing between a Big Gulp and a canned soda at 7-Eleven. Being a good spouse is as simple as buying your partner a Peloton bike. Success is drinking Cristal. Love is giving your husband a shirt without ring-around-the-collar or your fiancée a diamond worth three months' salary.

CULTURAL FORUM

Kids' Advertising: Is Self-Regulation Enough?

There is no shortage of critics of advertising to children, especially advertising that promotes unhealthy diets. In 1983, companies spent $100 million on child-focused advertising; today they annually spend close to $20 billion, and much of that money is

for fast food, cereal, and snacks. Opponents of advertising to kids point to social science evidence demonstrating a strong correlation between exposure to advertising and childhood obesity. One in five children and teens is obese, continuing a generation-long upward trend (**Stobbe, 2020**), leading the Federal Trade Commission to call childhood obesity the "most serious health crisis facing today's youth." The 65,000-member American Academy of Pediatrics has called for a ban on fast-food commercials on kids' television shows (which the Disney Company agreed in 2012 to do). The US Government Accountability Office has demanded greater FCC oversight of kids' television advertising.

The advertising and fast-food industries have responded with a number of plans that they hope will help protect kids while maintaining their own freedom of expression. Television sponsors have promised to strictly adhere to commercial time limits set by the 1990 Children's Television Act, and the Better Business Bureau's Children's Food and Beverage Advertising Initiative said it would enforce voluntary nutritional standards among its member companies. The National Restaurant Association launched an initiative among its members, including companies such as Burger King and Denny's, to offer and promote healthful kids' meals, a move mirrored by several companies such as Coca-Cola and a number of kid-oriented media outlets, including Cartoon Network. The question in the cultural forum, however, is how to find the correct balance between freedom of commercial speech and the protection of children.

Enter Your Voice

- Should children be considered a special class of people in need of extra protection? Or does the First Amendment outweigh critics' concerns about children's intellectual ability to understand ads?
- Why is the government involved at all? Aren't parents responsible for their children's well-being?
- Why do other developed countries regulate advertising to children and the United States relies primarily on industry self-regulation? What cultural, political, and economic factors might explain the difference?

Critics argue that ours has become a **consumer culture**—a culture in which personal worth and identity reside not in ourselves but in the products with which we surround ourselves. The consumer culture is corrupting because it imposes new definitions that serve the advertiser and not the culture on traditionally important aspects of our lives. If love, for example, can be bought rather than being something that has to be nurtured, how important can it be? If success is not something an individual values for the personal sense of accomplishment but rather is something chased for the material things associated with it, how does the culture evaluate success? Name the five most successful people you know. How many teachers did you name? How many social workers? How many wealthy or famous people did you name?

Critics further contend that the consumer culture also demeans the individuals who live in it. A common advertising strategy for stimulating desire and suggesting action is to imply that we are inadequate and should not be satisfied with ourselves as we are. We are too fat or too thin, our hair is

in need of improvement, our clothes are all wrong, and our spouses don't respect us. Personal improvement is only a purchase away. "To keep their markets growing, companies must keep persuading us that we have unmet needs," explains social critic George Monbiot (2011). "In other words, they must encourage us to become dissatisfied with what we have. To be sexy, beautiful, happy, relaxed, we must buy their products. They shove us on to the hedonic treadmill, on which we must run ever faster to escape a growing sense of inadequacy."

This ad-created consumer culture, according to former Wieden+Kennedy and Martin Agency executive Jelly Helm (2002) (his clients included Nike, Coke, and Microsoft), has produced an America that is "sick. . . . We work too hard so that we can buy things we don't need, made by factory workers who are paid too little, and produced in ways that threaten the very survival of the earth." It has produced an America that "will be remembered as the greatest wealth-producer ever. It will be a culture remembered for its promise and might and its tremendous achievements in technology and health. It also will be remembered as a culture of hedonism to rival any culture that has ever existed." And ranking only 19th in the United Nations's World Happiness Report, it is a culture that increasingly finds little joy in everyday life (Yardney, 2021).

Scope and Nature of the Advertising Industry

The proliferation of the different types of sales pitches described in the opening vignette is the product of an avalanche of advertising. Advertisers are exploring new ways to be seen and heard, to stand out, to be remembered, and to be effective. With so many kinds of commercial messages, the definition of advertising must be very broad. For our purposes, advertising is mediated messages paid for by and identified with a business or institution seeking to increase the likelihood that those who consume those messages will act or think as the advertiser wishes.

The American advertising industry annually spends more than $254 billion to place commercial messages before the public; globally the number is $628 billion (**"The Big List," 2019**). This amount does not include the billions of dollars spent in the planning, production, and distribution of those ads. An overwhelming proportion of all this activity is conducted through and by advertising agencies.

The Advertising Agency

There are approximately 13,000 ad agencies operating in the United States, employing roughly 189,000 people (**Guttmann, 2020a**). However, for the first time in history, ad agency employment has declined at the same time ad spending is increasing, primarily because of **programmatic buying**—automated, data-driven buying of online advertising—and the migration of much advertising to companies' in-house agencies. Fewer than 500 agencies annually earn more than $1 million, and while the giant agencies garner most of our attention, there is significant growth among **boutique agencies**, smaller, more personalized, and task-specific ad agencies (for example, dealing primarily with social media marketing) or product-specific agencies (for example, handling only pet supply accounts). Many agencies produce the ads they develop, and virtually all buy time and space in various media for their clients. Production is billed at an agreed-upon price called a **retainer**; placement of advertising in media is compensated through **commissions**, typically 15% of the cost of the time or space. Commissions account for as much as 75% of the income of larger agencies. You can see the ad revenues of the world's top-earning agencies in **Figure 8.2**.

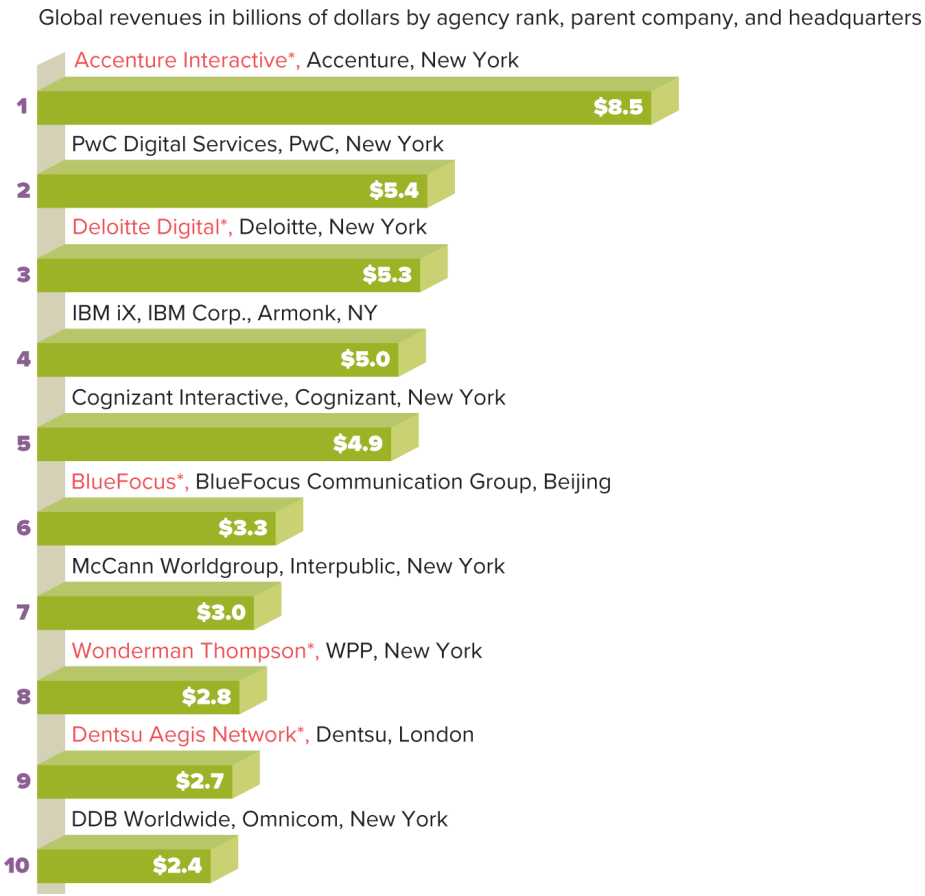


Figure 8.2 World's Largest Ad Agency Networks, 2018.

Source: ***"Consolidated Networks," 2019***.

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Ad agencies are usually divided into departments, the number determined by the size and services of the operation. Smaller agencies might contract with outside companies for the services of these typical ad agency departments:

- *Administration* is the agency's management and accounting operations.
- *Account management* is typically handled by an account executive who serves as liaison between agency and client, keeping communication flowing between the two and heading the team of specialists assigned by the agency to the client.
- The *creative department* is where the advertising is developed from idea to ad. It involves copywriting, graphic design, and often the actual production of the piece—for example, radio, television, and Web spots.
- The *media department* makes the decisions about where and when to place ads and then buys the appropriate time or space. (See **Figure 8.3** for a projected breakdown of ad spending by major medium in the United States.) The effectiveness of a given placement is judged by its **cost per thousand (CPM)**, the cost of reaching 1,000 audience members. For example, an ad that costs $20,000 to place in a major magazine and is read by 1 million people has a CPM of $20.
- *Market research* tests product viability in the market, the best venues for commercial messages, the nature and characteristics of potential buyers, and sometimes the effectiveness of the ads.

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- Many larger agencies have *public relations departments* as well.

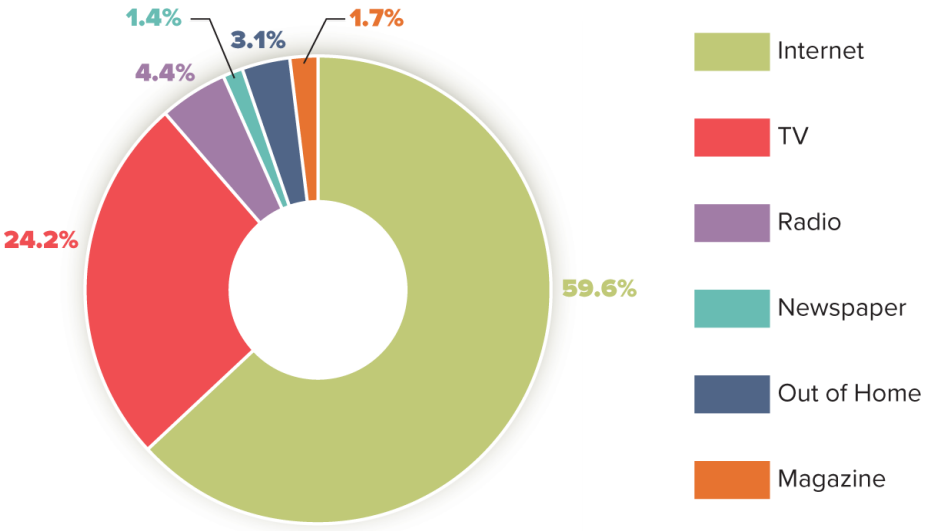
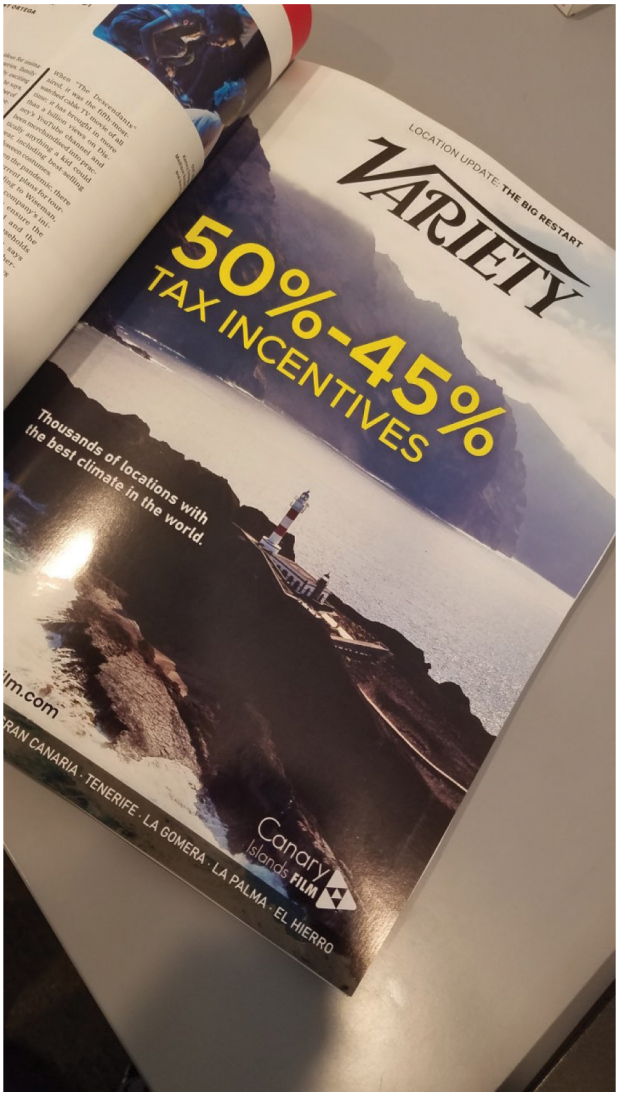


Figure 8.3 Share of US Ad Spending by Medium, 2024 Projection.

Source: ***"Share," 2020***.



▼ Through this magazine industrial ad, Spain's Canary Islands hope to entice movie makers from around the world to bring their productions to their shores.

Jordan Dowd

Types of Advertising

The advertising produced and placed by ad agencies can be classified according to the purpose of the advertising and the target market. You may be familiar with the following types of advertising:

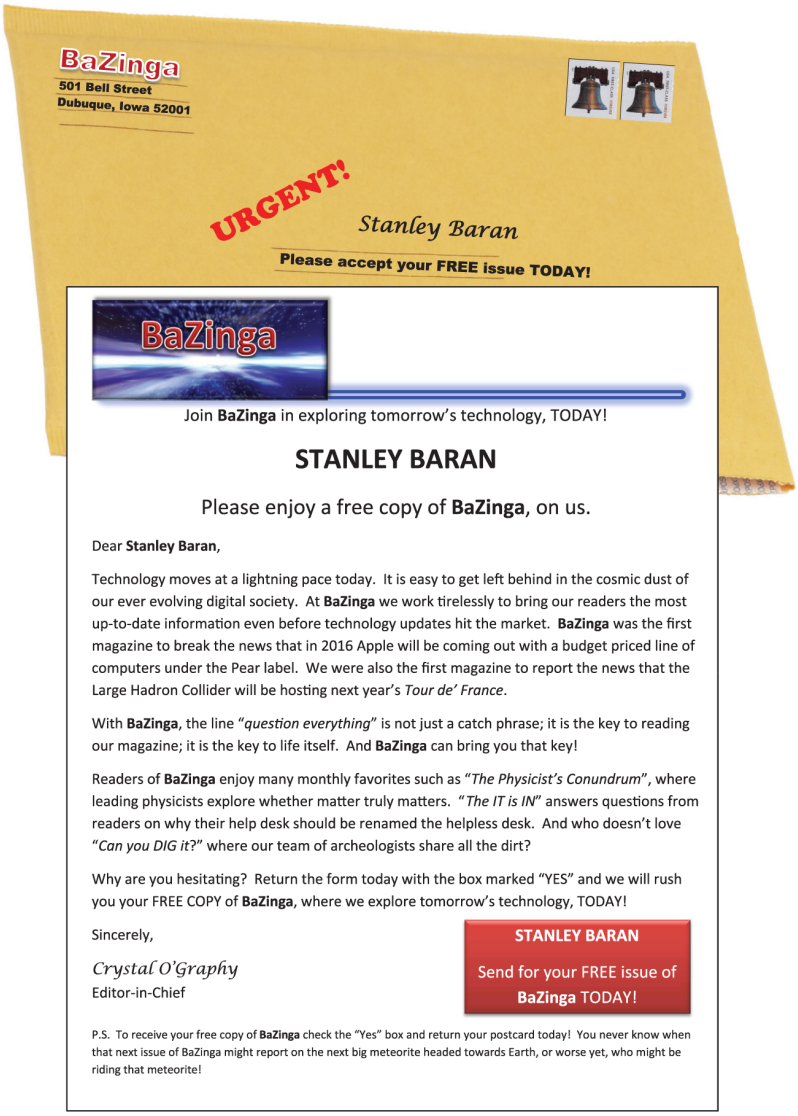
Institutional or corporate advertising. Companies do more than just sell products; companies also promote their names and reputations. If a company name inspires confidence, selling its products is easier. Some institutional or corporate advertising promotes only the organization's image, such as "FTD Florists support the US Olympic Team." But some advertising sells the image at the same time it sells the product: "You can be sure if it's Westinghouse."

Trade or professional advertising. Typically found in trade and professional publications, messages aimed at retailers do not necessarily push the product or brand but rather promote product issues of importance to the retailer—volume, marketing support, profit potential, distribution plans, and promotional opportunities.

Retail advertising. A large part of the advertising we see every day focuses on products sold by retailers such as Macy's. Ads are typically local, reaching consumers where they live and shop.

Promotional retail advertising. Typically placed by retailers, promotional advertising focuses not on a product but on a promotion, a special event held by a retailer. "Midnight Madness Sale" and "Back to School Sale" are two promotions that often benefit from heavy advertising, particularly in newspapers and local television.

Industrial advertising. Advertising of products and services directed toward a particular industry is usually found in industry trade publications. For example, *Broadcasting & Cable*, the primary trade magazine for the television industry, runs ads from program syndicators hoping to sell their shows to stations. It also runs ads from transmitter and camera manufacturers.



▼ In this direct marketing piece, the advertiser has not only personalized the pitch—Dear Stanley Baran—but has also targeted this consumer's particular interests in the environment and technology based on its knowledge of his magazine subscriptions and Web usage.

(Envelope): Ingram Publishing/SuperStock; (Exploding Star): Brand X/ Superstock; (postage stamps): Mark Steinmetz/McGraw Hill

National consumer advertising. National consumer advertising constitutes the majority of what we see in the media we routinely consume. It is usually product advertising, commissioned by the manufacturer—McDonald's, Honda,

Cheerios, Sony, Nike—aimed at potential buyers.

Direct market advertising. Product or service advertising aimed at likely buyers rather than at all consumers is called direct market advertising. These targeted consumers are reached through direct mail, catalogs, and telemarketing (the original addressable technologies). This advertising can be personalized—"Yes, BILL CAMPBELL, you can drive a Jeep Grand Cherokee for less than you think"—and customized. Computer data from credit card and other purchases, zip codes, telephone numbers, and organizational memberships are a few of the ways consumers are identified.

Often thought of as old-fashioned, direct mail generates more response—as much as 10 times more—than digital efforts such as e-mail, social media advertising, and paid search, especially for high-consideration and high-value purchases such as life insurance and real estate (**Brooks, 2020**).

Out-of-home advertising. As we saw in the opening vignette, advertising is inescapable.

One reason is that we are exposed to advertising even when away from home and otherwise not actually engaged in media consumption. Out-of-home advertising, which in the US accounts for more than $8 billion in annual ad spending, can include ads on billboards, street furniture, transit vehicles, and the digital screens we encounter everywhere from the gas pump to the DMV. Globally, the amount is over $40 billion, eclipsing newspaper advertising for the first time in 2020. Much out-of-home ad spending is on digital technologies, such as billboards that can be tailored by time of day, weather, traffic conditions, and even proximity of individual consumers as revealed by their smartphones (**Queiroz, 2020**).

Public service advertising. Advertising that does not sell commercial products or services but promotes organizations and themes of importance to the public is public service advertising. Ads for the Heart Fund, the United Negro College Fund, and MADD are typical of this form. They are usually carried free of charge by the medium that houses them.



Public service advertising allows advertisers to use their skills to serve society. Here is a still from a spot for the National Sexual Violence Resource Center.

From "Public Service Announcement Posters" by the National Sexual Violence Resource Center, 2012. Available from http://www.nsvrc.org. Copyright 2012 by the National Sexual Violence Resource Center. Reprinted with permission.

The Regulation of Advertising

The FTC is the primary federal agency for the regulation of advertising. The FCC regulates the commercial practices of the broadcasting industry, and individual states can police deceptive advertising through their own regulatory and criminal bureaucracies. In the deregulation movement of

1980, oversight by the FTC changed from regulating unfair and deceptive advertising to regulating and enforcing *complaints* against deceptive advertising, typically from a brand's competitor.

The FTC has several options for enforcement when it determines that a false-claim complaint against an advertiser is justified. It can issue a **cease-and-desist order** demanding that the practice be stopped. It can impose fines. It can order the creation and distribution of **corrective advertising**—that is, a new set of ads must be produced by the offender that corrects the original misleading effort. For example, in 2012, American tobacco companies were ordered to run corrective ads containing wording such as "Cigarettes cause cancer, lung disease, heart attacks, and premature death."

One of the greatest difficulties for the FTC is finding the line between false or deceptive advertising and **puffery**—that little lie that makes advertising more entertaining than it might otherwise be. "Whiter than white" and "stronger than dirt" are just two examples of puffery. On the assumption that the public does not read commercials literally—we know that Red Bull won't give us wings—the courts and the FTC allow a certain amount of exaggeration. Puffery may be allowed, but many in the ad industry dislike its slippery slope; puffery, says Keller & Heckman's Richard Leighton, means "never having to say you're sorry for untruths or exaggerated claims" (in **Greenberg, 2009**).

The FTC and courts, however, do recognize that an advertisement can be false in a number of ways. An advertisement is false if it does any one of the following:

- *Lies outright.* During the COVID-19 pandemic, when restaurants were especially dependent on take-out orders, food-delivery company Grubhub was sued for using its advertising "to steer patrons to its partner restaurants by falsely declaring that its competitors are closed or not accepting online orders when they are in fact open for business." In other words, the ads lied. Grubhub agreed to settle out of court (**Ellwanger, 2021**).
- *Does not tell the whole truth.* Miller Lite's "new taste protector cap" does indeed better preserve the taste of the beer. However, ads touting this feature do not tell the whole truth because Miller Lite's bottle caps are exactly the same as all other bottled beers' and have no taste-protecting characteristics beyond those of ordinary cans and bottles.
- *Lies by implication, using words, design, production device, sound, or a combination of these.* Television commercials for children's toys end with the product shown in actual size against a neutral background (a shot called an **island**). This is required because production techniques such as low camera angles and close-ups can make these toys seem larger or better than they actually are.

Likewise, a University of Phoenix ad campaign featuring corporations such as Microsoft, AT&T, and the American Red Cross resulted in the online university forgiving $141 million in student debt and refunding another $50 million to students. The implication was that these companies partnered with the school for special job opportunities or to design curriculum. None of the identified companies had any official relationship with the university (**Forbes, 2019**).

Measuring the Effectiveness of Advertising

It might seem reasonable to judge the effectiveness of an ad campaign by a subsequent increase in sales, but many factors other than advertising influence how well a product fares, including changes in the economy, product quality, breadth of distribution, and competitors' pricing and promotion strategies. Department store magnate John Wanamaker is said to have complained in the late 1880s, "I

know that fifty percent of my advertising is wasted. I just don't know which fifty percent." Today's advertisers feel much the same way, and, as you might imagine, they find this a less-than-comforting situation. Agencies, therefore, turn to research to provide greater certainty.

A number of techniques may be used before an ad or ad campaign is released. **Copy testing—**measuring the effectiveness of advertising messages by showing them to consumers—is used for all forms of advertising. It is sometimes conducted with focus groups, collections of people brought together to see the advertising and discuss it with agency and client personnel. Sometimes copy testing employs **consumer juries**. These people, considered to be representative of the target market, review a number of approaches or variations of a campaign or ad. **Forced exposure**, used primarily for television advertising, requires advertisers to bring consumers to a theater or other facility (typically with the promise of a gift or other payment), where they see a television program, complete with the new commercials. People are asked their brand preferences before the show and then after. In this way, the effectiveness of the commercials can be gauged.

Once the campaign or ad is before the public, a number of different tests can be employed to evaluate the effectiveness of the ad. In **recognition tests** people who have seen a given publication are asked, in person or by phone, whether they remember seeing specific ads. In **recall testing,** consumers are asked, again in person or by phone, to identify which print or broadcast ads they most easily remember. This recall can be unaided—that is, the researcher offers no hints ("Have you seen any interesting commercials or ads lately?")—or aided—that is, the researcher identifies a specific class of products ("Have you seen any interesting pizza commercials lately?"). In recall testing, the advertisers assume that an easily recalled ad is an effective ad. **Awareness tests** make this same assumption, but they are not aimed at specific ads. Their goal is to measure the cumulative effect of a campaign in terms of "consumer consciousness" of a product. A likely question in an awareness test, usually made by telephone, is "What brands of laundry detergent can you name?"

What these research techniques lack is the ability to demonstrate the link that is of most interest to the client—did the ad move the consumer to buy the product? The industry hopes that all-important connection can be better discovered using **neuromarketing research—**biometric measures such as brainwaves, facial expressions, eye tracking, sweating, and heart rate monitoring. Neuromarketing research employs electroencephalogram (EEG; measuring electrical activity in the brain in response to ads); functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI; tracking blood flow to see what parts of the brain are activated by ads); eye tracking (monitoring the eye's movement across an ad); facial coding (monitoring how expressions change in response to ads); and galvanic skin response (measuring changes in electrical resistance across the skin caused by an emotional reaction to an ad). Because the unconscious accounts for the vast majority of the way peoples' brains process information, these methods tap consumers' unconscious reactions to marketing and advertising.

This research is not without critics, however, who argue that because neuromarketing appeals to the base level of human consciousness, it exploits consumers' nonreasoned, instinctual responses. Such concerns were central to the creation in 2019 of the Advertising Research Foundation's Member Code of Conduct. Still, industry dissatisfaction with more traditional research methods continues to fuel work on neuromarketing research.

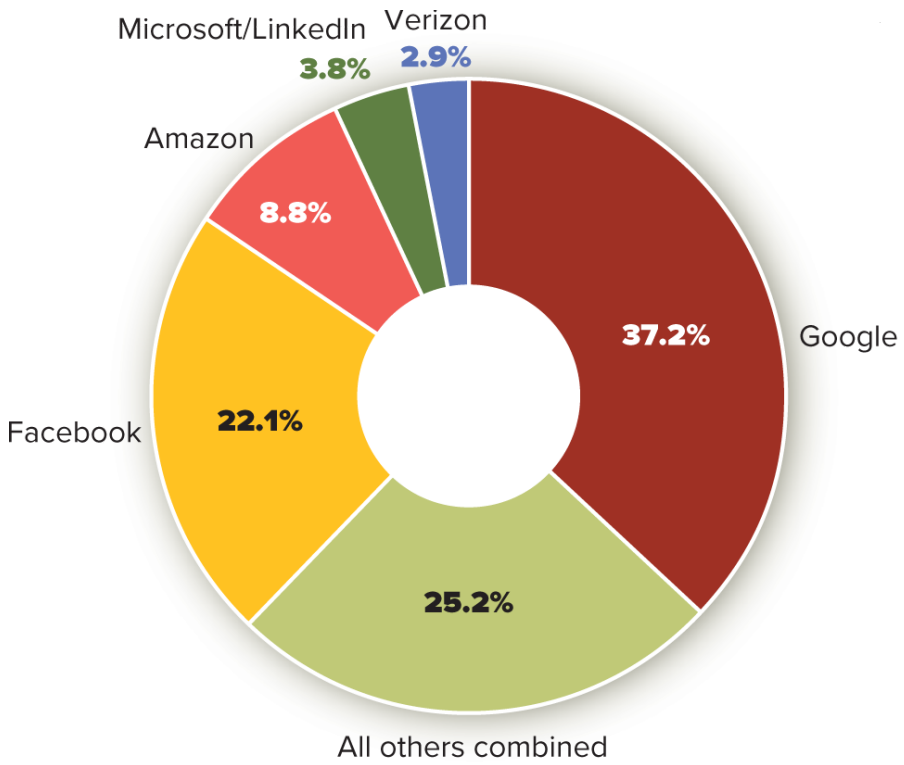
Trends and Convergence in Advertising

Today, the advertising industry is facing, as media writer Bob Garfield calls it, "a jarring media universe in which traditional forms of mass entertainment swiftly disappear and advertisers are left in the lurch" (in **Klosterman, 2005**, p. 63). In fact, although time spent with media is at an all-time high, as you read in **Chapter 1**, time spent with *ad-supported* media, both in the US and globally, is at an all-time low (**Mandese, 2021**). As a result, marketers are responding with constant reinvention of the industry's *economics*, *creativity*, and *relationship with consumers.*

New and Converging Technologies

The production of advertising has obviously been altered by computers. Computer graphics, morphing (digitally combining and transforming images), and other special effects are now common in national retail television advertising. And the same technology used to change the ads behind the batter in a televised baseball game is now employed to insert product placements into programs where no placement originally existed.

But it is digital advertising, the convergence of all traditional forms of advertising with new digital technologies, that now attracts the most industry interest. Digital accounted for more than half of all US ad spending for the first time in 2020 (**Vranica, 2020**). Over the past decade, Internet advertising has surpassed one-by-one traditional media outlets, starting with radio, then magazines and newspapers (**Ives, 2012**), and then television (**Mandese, 2016**). You can see the biggest digital ad revenue earners, as well as the dominance of the top two, Google and Facebook, in **Figure 8.4**.



▼ **Figure 8.4** Top 5 US Digital Ad Revenue Earners by Share of Market.

Source: ***Wagner, 2019***.

Web advertising has matured since the first display advertising, or **banners**, static online billboards placed conspicuously somewhere on a Web page, appeared in May 1994 (**D'Angelo, 2009**). Other forms are **search marketing**, advertising sold next to or in search results produced by users' keyword searches; **rich media**, sophisticated, interactive Web advertising, usually employing sound and video; **lead generation** directing users who've expressed an interest to a brand's sales website; and online classified advertising.

Smartphones, Tablets, and Social Networking Sites

Boosting all forms of digital advertising is their movement to mobile technologies, such as smartphones and tablets, and the expansion of social networking sites. US Internet ad spending may have exceeded $100 billion in 2018, but in 2020, mobile Internet ad spending alone exceeded that amount, accounting for a majority of all online ad spending (**Zote, 2020**).

Industry data indicate that smartphone and tablet advertising encourages **e-commerce**, the buying of products and services online. In 2016, for the first time, people made more of their purchases online than they did in stores. As online shopping accelerated, so did the use of mobile devices to make purchases. That's the good news for advertisers. The bad news, according to tech writer Sam **Biddle (2018)**, is that research indicates that because our mobile devices know quite a bit about us, including where we are at the moment, who we communicate with, and what we like, "when the data mining curtain is pulled back, we really don't like what we see. There's something unnatural about the

kind of targeting that's become routine in the ad world . . . something taboo, a violation of norms we consider inviolable—it's just harder to tell they're being violated online than off." Highly targeted mobile marketing, therefore, walks an even finer personalization versus privacy line than do other forms of online commercial interaction, so much so that 40% of ad professionals personally feel uneasy about their company's use of the data they collect (Mandese, 2020a).

Social networking sites are clearly a boon to advertisers, as they can direct very specific messages to very specific users based on their freely provided information, a fact, as you just read, that does not make everyone happy. Advertisers also take advantage of sites' interactivity, and virtually every company of any size has at the very least a Facebook and Twitter presence. Social media sites take in more than $100 billion in advertising a year in the United States, with Facebook and Twitter commanding most of that revenue. Social media ad spending is expected to grow at an annual rate of over 8% (Zote, 2020).

This promised growth, however, is challenged by the explosion of the Internet's **toxic content**—racist, misogynistic, threatening, or otherwise hateful online content—particularly on social media. The issue is brand safety; companies worry that their ads will show up in or adjacent to content that they would prefer not to be associated with. In 2017, Procter & Gamble slashed its digital ad budget specifically to avoid "spending money on ads that are placed in inappropriate places," according to chief financial officer John Moeller (in Neff, 2017, p. 4). A year later, another major global advertiser, Unilever, promised to do the same. "Fake news, racism, sexism, terrorists spreading messages of hate, toxic content directed at children—parts of the Internet we have ended up with is a million miles from where we thought it would take us," explained chief marketing officer Keith Weed. "It is in the digital media industry's interest to listen and act on this" (in Shaban, 2018).

And the industry did just that. In 2018, Facebook, with a tab labeled "Info and Ads," and Twitter, with its Ads Transparency Center, unveiled protocols designed to verify the legitimacy of advertisers on their sites (Frenkel, 2018). In that same year, the American Association of Advertising Agencies established the Advertiser Protection Bureau to develop a safety metric to rate sites from "most safe" to "least safe," to commit agencies and brands to alerting one another when their ads appeared in unsafe environments, and to flag and investigate risky sites (Faw, 2018).

Still, digital advertising in all its forms sits firmly at the center of the change buffeting today's ad industry because of its low cost (relative to traditional media), great reach, and, most important, interactivity, which gives it an accountability unparalleled in the traditional media.

NEW ECONOMICS

Consumers are increasingly dissatisfied with hypercommercialism in other media and the lack of relevancy that much advertising has for them. They are becoming resistant to and resentful of much of the marketing they encounter, as you saw earlier in this chapter. As a result, many advertisers are now less interested in CPM, focusing instead on **return on investment (ROI)**. After all, who cares how many thousands you are reaching if they reject your message? Industry professionals who look at Internet advertising and see that it is ideally suited for increased ROI have begun asking why all media can't offer some of that benefit. "As technology increasingly enables fine targeting and interaction between marketer and consumer," Bob Garfield (2005) argued, "the old measurement and deployment standards are primitive almost to the point of absurdity" (p. 58).

Rather than simple brand exposure, measured by CPM, advertisers have begun to demand accountability. As such, the Web's **performance-based advertising**, for example, provides the ideal. The website carrying the ad gets paid only when the consumer takes some specific action, making a purchase or linking to the sponsor's site. This Web-inspired demand for accountability led to calls for the development of a new measure of the *effectiveness of all advertising*—**engagement**. Beyond moving advertising dollars to platforms promising greater engagement, demands for accountability can be seen in a number of innovations that threaten the traditional agency–brand relationship described earlier in this chapter: Clients are increasingly demanding from agencies—and receiving—agreements on campaign-specific outcomes and consensus on **accountability metrics**—that is, how the effectiveness of a specific ad or campaign will be judged. Some agencies now offer money-back guarantees if they cannot improve a brand's ROI or **value-compensation programs** in which all or part of the payment of an agency's fees is based on meeting preestablished goals. A majority of all agency–client contracts now contain these pay-for-performance incentives.

One reason there is increased demand for accountability, especially for online advertising, is the growth of programmatic buying. Programmatic buying now accounts for 85% of all digital ad spending, and is expected to grow at a rate of 15% a year (**Mandese, 2020b**). Because most online advertising is targeted to some degree to specific user demographics (if not specific users), the data used for programmatic buying can be manipulated by the creation of fake impressions or views. These false positives are created primarily by *bots*, in effect "robot" users. Sophisticated bots can take over any computer that's online. They can then simulate human Internet activity (for example, commandeering the mouse and moving the cursor over ads to create exposures). They can even fake search histories and cookies to become demographically appealing to programmatic buying algorithms. This **programmatic ad fraud** costs advertisers more than $44 billion annually, up from $19 billion a year in 2018 (**"Estimated Cost," 2021**). In response, in 2016 a consortium of advertising industry professional groups created the Trustworthy Accountability Group to identify and eliminate ad fraud, in part through the implementation of an antifraud certification program, TrustX, intended to serve as the industry standard.

Nonetheless, estimates are that half of all online ad clicks are fraudulent, resulting in serious strains on the agency–brand relationship, to the point that 28% of companies say they have lost trust in their ad agencies over the last few years (**Mandese, 2019**). The solution for many advertisers, then, is to trust themselves; while 90% of brands continue to retain outside ad agencies, 78% of the Association of National Advertisers' 1,100 member companies representing 25,000 brands have established in-house agencies, primarily to handle sponsored content (see **Chapter 4**), social media advertising, and data/marketing analytics (**Whitman, 2019**).

NEW CREATIVITY

Virtually all advertisers understand that the Internet-fueled fragmentation and democratization of media require a new type of appeal to consumers. If people are increasingly rejecting traditional *mass* media and the commercial messages they carry, the industry must become more creative in its messages and how it gets them to desired consumers. We've already seen many examples—product placement in all media, specially designed and targeted commercials delivered through cable or called up by DVR, online advergames, and the examples of ambient advertising and branded experiences that opened this chapter.

Much of advertising's creative community has learned to distinguish between typical, often unappreciated contextual advertising on the Internet and imaginative video advertising delivered mobile technologies, portable game devices, and online. For example, traditional big-time television advertisers such as BMW, IKEA, Lincoln-Mercury, Hidden Valley Ranch, and Burger King have moved significant amounts of their advertising dollars to the creation and distribution of short online films, sometimes episodic and often featuring well-known actors, to tout their products. Among the best received have been YouTube's thousands of brand channels. The LEGO channel, for example, features reimagining of famous movie plots played out by LEGO characters. A new release of one of these webisodes, available in several different languages, can attract as many as a million views in a single week. The GoPro channel offers professionally produced webisodes shot on that video technology, as well as compilations of user-generated videos.



◂ Moving beyond the TV commercial. A-list Hollywood talent now bring greater creativity to marketing brands. *The Journey*, a mini-movie featuring actor Sylvia Hoeks chasing through the streets of Istanbul and running on Turkish Airlines' website, is directed by Ridley Scott.

Photo 12/Universal Studios/Alamy Stock Photo

However, not all online brand video lives on YouTube. Fans can find director Ridley Scott's (*Alien*, *Blade Runner*) *The Journey*, a mini-movie featuring actor Sylvia Hoeks (*The Girl in the Spider's Web*) chasing through the streets of Istanbul, on the website of Turkish Airlines. Cable TV viewers can enjoy *A Recipe for Seduction* on the Lifetime Channel. Starring Mario Lopez as a young Col. Sanders, the 15-minute original movie offers "mystery, suspense, deception, 'fowl' play and—at the heart of it all—love and fried chicken," Kentucky Fried Chicken, of course (**Adams, 2020**). "You can create content that is compelling, and you don't have to spend money [on TV commercials]. We think this is the direction advertising is headed," says commercial producer Steve Golin. "There is a lot of resistance to watching bread-and-butter advertising" (in **Tugend, 2016**, p. B3).

NEW RELATIONSHIP WITH CONSUMERS

The Internet, as we've seen throughout this text, makes mass communication less of a monologue and more of a conversation. Today's consumers are no longer passive media *receivers*, taking whatever the television networks and movie studios insist they should. Instead, they are empowered media *users*, increasingly free to control and shape the content they receive. In the relative youth of Internet advertising, Ogilvy & Mather's vice chair Steve Hayden predicted that "as all media becomes addressable, all media becomes refusable." He argued that because the consumer now has the power to accept or reject content, an advertiser has to enter into a transaction with him or her, saying, "'I'll give you this content in exchange for your attention,' which has always been the model of mass advertising. But now, I've got to make that deal on a person-to-person basis" (in **Kirsner, 2005**).

This new **permission marketing**, of necessity, has led to a rethinking of the relationship between advertiser and consumer, one in which they act as partners, sharing information for mutual benefit. The new model of advertising is, as Hayden predicted, a conversation between marketers and **prosumers**, proactive consumers who reject most traditional advertising and use multiple sources—traditional media, the Internet, product-rating magazines, recommendations from friends in the know—not only to research a product but also to negotiate price and other benefits. Economists call this *expressing disapproval.* Consumers now have two choices: *exit* (they simply do not buy the product) or *voice* (they explain exactly why they are dissatisfied and what they'd like instead).

Active media users, who are at the same time skilled prosumers who have access to interactive technologies, ensure that voice will, indeed, replace exit as the measure of advertisers' success.



▲ The growing American

Hispanic population is increasingly targeted by advertisers in both English and Spanish. Here is an example from Dove made by Unilever.

Spencer Grant/PhotoEdit

Increased Audience Segmentation

Advertisers face other challenges as well. As the number of media outlets for advertising grows, and as audiences for traditional media are increasingly fragmented, advertisers have been forced to refine

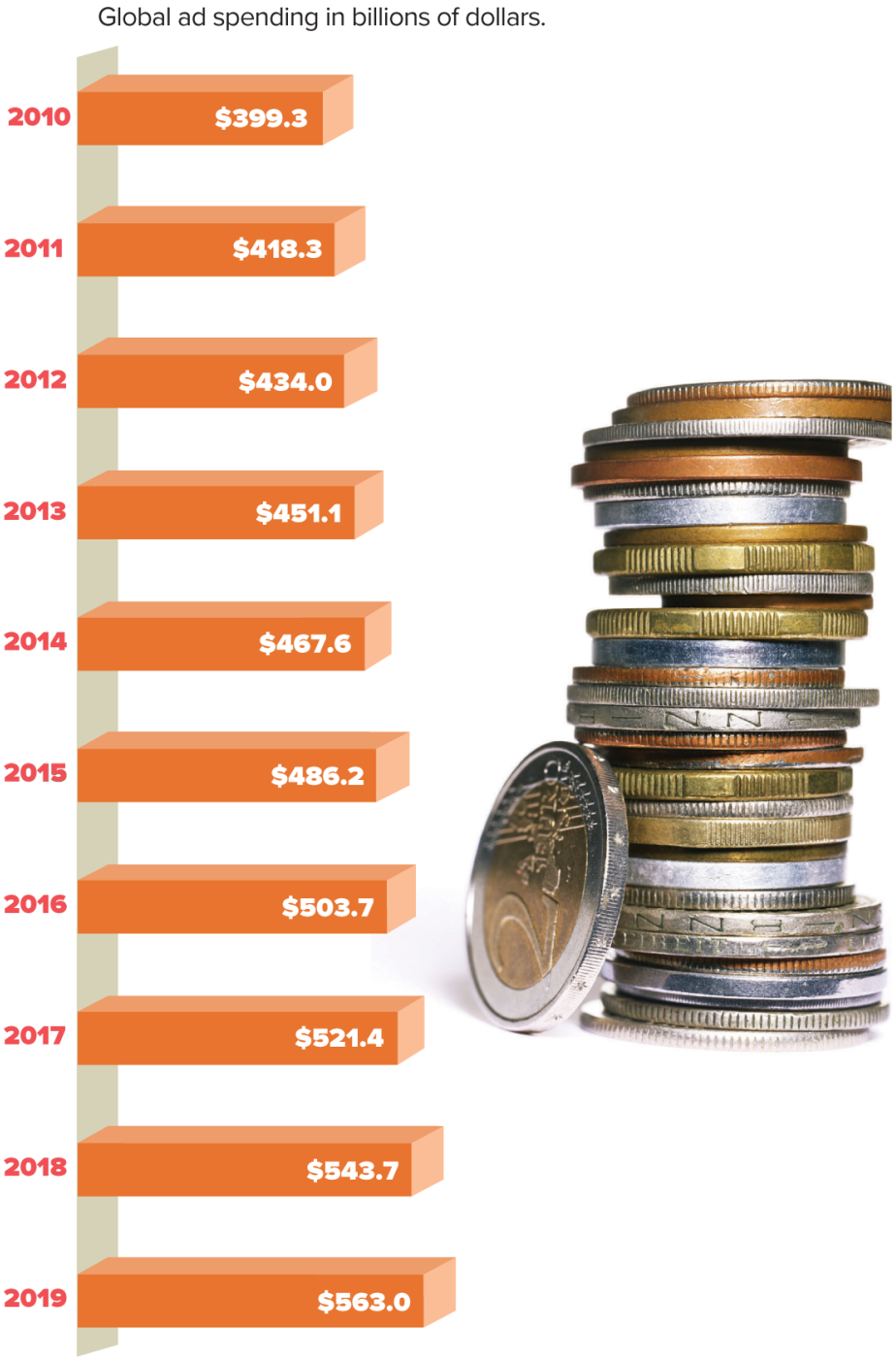
their ability to reach and speak to ever-narrower audience segments. Digital technology facilitates this practice, but segmentation exists apart from the new technologies.

The ethnic composition of the United States is changing, and advertising is keeping pace. African Americans constitute approximately 13% of the total US population; Hispanics, now the nation's largest minority, make up approximately 18% (more than half of both populations is younger than 35); and Asian Americans make up roughly 6% of the population. **Demographic segmentation—**the practice of appealing to audiences defined by varying personal and social characteristics such as race/ ethnicity, gender, and economic level—is the ad industry's dominant form of targeting. This is no surprise as African Americans spend $1.4 trillion annually on consumer products. US Hispanics wield $1.7 trillion in purchasing power, and Asian Americans have $1.2 trillion (**"Buying Power," 2020**).

Obviously, advertisers would be foolish to ignore these consumers, just as they have belatedly come to realize the need to appeal to an oft-neglected group, older Americans, 77% of whom feel they are ignored by advertisers. Despite the fact that many industry insiders consider the 18- to 34-year-old demographic to be their Holy Grail, Americans 50 and older not only represent a third of the population and control $3.2 trillion in consumer spending (**Topken, 2019**), but they spend more, have greater household income, have amassed more accumulated wealth, and are more likely to own their own homes than those under 50 (**Bradbury, 2019**).

Globalization

As media and national economies have globalized, advertising has adapted. US agencies are increasingly merging with, acquiring, or affiliating with agencies from other parts of the world. Revisit **Figure 8.2**. You'll see that five of the top 10 global agencies are owned by foreign companies. In addition to the globalization of media and economies, a second force driving this trend is the demographic fact that today 80% of the world's population lives in developing countries, and nearly two-thirds of all the people in the world live in Asia alone. The industry is already putting its clients in touch with these consumers. Foreign ad spending first exceeded US totals in 1980, and ad spending in *developing* nations is growing at a faster rate than it is in the developed world. In fact, the Asia-Pacific region surpassed North America as the world's largest advertising market in 2015, and emerging markets such as the "BRIC" countries (Brazil, Russia, India, and China) routinely post year-to-year rates of growth in advertising that exceed that of the United States. **Figure 8.5** shows the growth of global ad spending from 2010 to 2019.



◂ **Figure 8.5** Global Advertising Spending, 2010–2019.

Source: Guttmann, 2020b.

Brand X Pictures/PunchStock/Getty Images

DEVELOPING MEDIA LITERACY SKILLS

Interpreting Intentional Imprecision

Advertisers often use intentional imprecision in words and phrases to say something other than the precise truth, and they do so in all forms of advertising—profit and nonprofit, scrupulously honest and less so. There are three categories of intentional imprecision: unfinished statements, qualifiers, and connotatively loaded words and expressions.

We are all familiar with *unfinished statements*, such as the one for the battery that "lasts twice as long." Others include "You can be sure if it's Westinghouse," "Magnavox gives you more," and "Easy-Off makes oven cleaning easier." A literate advertising consumer should ask, "Twice as long as *what*?" "Of *what* can I be sure?" "Gives me more of *what*?" "Easier than *what*?" *Better, more, stronger, whiter, faster*—all are comparative adjectives whose true purpose is to create a comparison between two or more things. When the other half of the comparison is not identified, intentional imprecision is being used to create the illusion of comparison.

Qualifiers are words that limit a claim. A product "helps" relieve stress, for instance. It may not relieve stress as well as rest and better planning and organization, but once the qualifier "helps" appears, an advertiser is free to make just about any claim for the product because all the ad really says is that it helps, not that it does anything in and of itself. It's the consumer's fault for misreading. A product may "fight" grime, but there is no promise that it will win. In the statement "Texaco's coal gasification process could mean you won't have to worry about how it affects the environment," "could" relieves the advertiser of all responsibility. "Could" does not mean "will." Moreover, the fact that you *could stop worrying about the environment* does not mean the product does not harm the environment—only that you could stop worrying about it.

Some qualifiers are more apparent. "Taxes not included," "limited time only," "only at participating locations," "prices may vary," "some assembly required," "additional charges may apply," and "batteries not included" are qualifiers presented after the primary claims have been made. Often these words are spoken quickly at the end of radio and television commercials, or they appear in small print on the screen or at the bottom of a newspaper or magazine ad.

Other qualifiers are part of the product's advertising slogan. Boodles gin is "the ultra-refined British gin that only the world's costliest methods could produce. Boodles. The world's costliest British gin." After intimating that the costliest methods are somehow necessary to make the best gin, this advertiser qualifies its product as the costliest "British" gin. There may be costlier, and possibly better, Irish, US, Russian, and Canadian gins. Many sugared children's cereals employ the tactic of displaying the cereal on a table with fruit, milk, and toast. The announcer says or the copy reads, "Coco Yummies are *a part of* this complete breakfast"—so is the tablecloth. But the cereal, in and of itself, adds little to the nutritional completeness of the meal. It is "a part of" it.

Advertising is full of words that are *connotatively loaded.* "Best-selling" may say more about a product's advertising and distribution system than its quality. "More of the pain-relieving medicine doctors prescribe most" means aspirin. Cherry-*flavored* products have no cherries in them. On the ecolabeling

front, “no additives” and “clean” are meaningless; the manufacturer decides what is and is not an additive and what is or is not clean. “Cruelty free”—again, the company decides. Other connotatively loaded ecolabels are “hypoallergenic” (advertiser-created, scientific-sounding, and meaningless), “fragrance free” (you can’t smell the scent because of the chemicals used to hide it), “nontoxic” (won’t kill you, but could cause other health problems), and “natural,” “science-based,” “earth smart,” “green,” and “nature’s friend”—all meaningless. Advertisers want consumers to focus on the connotation, not the actual meaning of these words.

Intentional imprecision is puffery. It is not illegal; neither is it sufficiently troubling to the advertising industry to warrant self-regulatory limits. But puffery is neither true nor accurate, and its purpose is to deceive. This means that the responsibility for correctly and accurately reading advertising that is intentionally imprecise rests with the media-literate consumer.



▲ We regularly encounter advertising text that is less than informative, although maybe not as bad as that offered by this advertiser.

Wildt, Chris/CartoonStock

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Introduction to Chapter 9

About This Chapter

If you choose to go into the field of Public Relations, at some point in your life you'll have the following conversation:

> **You:** It's nice to meet you.
>
> **Person you just met:** Nice to meet you too. What do you do for a living?
>
> **You:** I'm in public relations.
>
> **Person you just met:** Oh cool! Advertising must be so interesting.
>
> **You:** Um. . . yes. Yes it is.

Don't worry. It's not just you. People commonly confuse public relations and advertising, and even if we're too polite to make them feel awkward in public by correcting their confusion, it's important to understand the distinction between the two fields. As you'll find out momentarily, that's a slightly harder proposition than it might seem, since there's a bit of a controversy about what public relations means in the first place. However, no matter how you define it, public relations is its own field with its own distinct history, and in many ways it is now more influential than advertising. The strategies that people in public relations have developed to guide, persuade, and otherwise affect their audiences have defined the way we think about the modern world. We are a public relations culture, and it's hard to understand both that culture and our media without at least a basic understanding of public relations history.

WHAT TO FOCUS ON

Focus on the information in this introduction. In the upcoming chapter, pay attention to the "A Short History of Public Relations" section. Beyond that, focus on the parts of the chapter that include the key words, important people, and questions listed at the end of this introduction.

Additional Information About Public Relations

Defining "Public Relations"

Remember when we talked at such great length about the difficulty defining important words? Welcome to the study of public relations. The upcoming chapter uses the Public Relations Society of America's own definition of what public relations is:

> Public relations is a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics.

This is a definition that was created by the PRSA by soliciting suggestions from PR professionals and then carefully selecting the best choice. However, their definition falls victim to one of the problems with definitions we identified in the chapter on journalism: the PRSA chose a definition that reflects what they feel *ought to be true* about public relations, not necessarily what *actually is* true. The PRSA definition is quite narrow, framing public relations as something that *only* builds relationships. Really? That's it? What about PR campaigns that involve buying television advertisements? Do those ads necessarily build relationships, and if not, are they somehow not part of public relations? The PRSA definition also makes public relations sound like something that can only be good for everyone involved. What happens, for example, if a PR agency conducts a campaign that only benefits its client corporation and doesn't benefit the audience of the campaign? Does that mean the campaign wasn't public relations in the first place? And who decides what is beneficial? It makes sense for a professional organization like PRSA to choose a definition of their field that encourages members to act ethically, but their definition seems less like a serious attempt to describe public relations and more like, well, part of a PR campaign for public relations practitioners.

Instead of the PRSA definition in the upcoming chapter, we'll be using the good, old-fashioned dictionary definition of **public relations**:

> The business of inducing the public to have understanding for and goodwill toward a person, firm, or institution.[1]

This definition has the virtue of describing what public relations does, not what the profession aspires to be. PR is about inducing a specific result from the public (or specific subgroups of the broader public, depending on the goals of the campaign in question). Public relations includes everything involved in the attempt to induce good will. And, finally, PR is an activity that people, firms, or institutions can engage in. Can public relations be focused on building relationships? Sure, that can definitely be part of the business of inducing the public to have good will. Many people would say that no strategy to induce public good will can be successful if it doesn't build relationships. But bad public relations is still public relations. Similarly, can public relations be mutually beneficial? Let's hope that's the case, though the history of public relations suggests that some PR is not beneficial to the public. And again, that "bad" or even unethical public relations is still PR.

One last thing worth noting about the definition of public relations is how PR differs from advertising. The two practices are closely related, both historically and in terms of modern business structure. Many modern PR firms offer advertising services, and some PR agencies are housed within larger advertising companies. Even so, advertising and public relations are distinct. While advertising necessarily involves some sort of production and publication of media artifacts or tangible

advertisements—from television ads to pencils with a company's name on them—public relations is much broader. A PR campaign might include advertising, but that is not essential. In many cases, public relations professionals attempt to induce goodwill by manipulating the media to cover their clients voluntarily, without the purchase of ad time. PR companies compose press releases, arrange interviews, write speeches, formulate policies, plan charitable events, coach executives, research markets and publics, work to influence government officials, help manage social media presences, and much more.

Focus on Critical Thinking: Who Was the Father of Public Relations?

Ivy Lee and Edward Bernays are often listed as two of the most influential figures in the early history of public relations. Indeed, each man is sometimes referred to as the father of public relations. The upcoming chapter describes some of both men's contributions to the field, but it's useful to talk in greater depth about both Lee and Bernays, and to consider their role in the history of PR. **Ivy Lee** started off his professional career as a newspaper reporter, working for some of the most prominent papers of his time. Around 1903, he started doing publicity work for political candidates. In 1904, he opened only the third public relations-oriented agency in the country. In 1905, he was representing the coal interests in a strike. He sent a handout to the newspaper editors in the area that was later documented in a magazine article. This "**Declaration of Principles**" by Lee announced several things: that Lee and his agency would do all their work openly and with transparency, that they would strive to be accurate in all their communications, that they would work with the press to answer any questions. Lee's "Declaration" is often cited by historians as *the* moment that public relations as a field was born—they believe that Lee established a new form of communication between organizations and the press. However, it is unlikely that Lee was the sole originator of these ideas. Public relations and media history scholar Karen Russell Miller argues that we ought to give some credit to president **Theodore Roosevelt**:

> Theodore Roosevelt's agitation for "corporate publicity," meaning mandated release of information from the trusts, was an important contributing factor in the timing of, as well as the motivation for, the rise of corporate publicity programs. Ivy Lee left his job as a newspaper reporter during the same year that Congress was debating Roosevelt's anti-trust legislation, including its requirement for corporate publicity. The head of Standard Oil, implicated by Roosevelt in sending telegrams to senators to oppose anti-trust legislation, was none other than John D. Rockefeller, whose son would hire Ivy Lee to represent Colorado Fuel and Iron during the anthracite coal strike 10 years later. Perhaps both had learned something important from this debate.[2]

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Russell notes that Roosevelt's campaigns against the trusts—and specifically his call for "publicity" as a tool for creating accountability for large corporations—had made its way into the popular press. By 1902, she demonstrates, the idea of corporate transparency as a necessary part of publicity was a common topic in newspaper articles.[3]

There are other reasons to question Ivy Lee's place as the father of public relations. For example, he used the term "publicity" over "public relations," and some scholars question whether he ever enunciated a clear understanding of public relations as we currently use the term.[4] Other scholars have pointed out that Lee's committment to transparency and ethics was not as strong as some historians report. The press did not fall in love with Lee as a spokesperson, often referring to him as "Poison Ivy." Lee was sometimes charged with misleading the press during important crises, and was seen as an enabler of the rich.[5] In spite of all of that, many scholars point to his accomplishments as evidence that he was a crucial figure in the history of public relations. "Lee managed. . . to set a

standard for his profession that elevated it from the hucksterism and press agentry of an earlier era. He insisted that actions by a company speak louder than words. He made openness and accuracy the watchwords for PR counselors and made informing the public, rather than ignoring or fooling it, the mission."[6]

Like Ivy Lee, **Edward Bernays** is often described as the father of public relations. Bernays got his start doing publicity work in the theater and dance world around 1914. His work then (and throughout his career) was deeply influenced by the ideas and writings of his uncle, **Sigmund Freud**, the founder of psychoanalysis. When the United States entered World War I in 1917, Bernays was deeply enthusiastic about serving his country. He worked hard to find a way to use his skills as a publicist, and in 1918 he was given a position with the U.S. Committee on Public Influence—the closest thing the federal government had to propaganda arm at the time. He used the techniques he had honed in the world of entertainment to help win the American public over to the idea of the war. While some historians describe Bernays' role in the pro-war propaganda machine as central, in reality he was never part of the Committee on Public Influence's "brain trust."[7] He returned from the war convinced that his adaptation of his uncle's theories could be used to change the public mind, and throughout his career he proved his beliefs by running successful campaigns for organizations like the American Tobacco Company, Simon and Schuster, the Multiple Sclerosis Society, General Electric, General Motors, Proctor and Gamble, and countless others. Where he really distinguished himself as a giant of public relations, however, was as a teacher, philosopher, and writer.

In 1923, Bernays taught the first college course ever titled Public Relations. "Also in 1923 he became the first to publish a book outlining the theory and practice of public relations, ***Crystallizing Public Opinion***."[8] That book is now recognized as the first public relations textbook. Bernays would go on to publish a total of fourteen books, including some of the most influential works in the history of public relations. Does that mean Bernays was the father of public relations? Many members of the profession have been reticent to make that claim. Bernays openly advocated mass manipulation of the public for the good of society. His 1955 book ***The Engineering of Consent*** applied many Freudian principles to the business of public relations, and was regarded by many at the time of its publication as a brilliant contribution to the field. Over time, however the idea that public relations carries out a function similar to propaganda—regardless of whether that function is allegedly beneficial— has been critiqued by many philosophers and public relations experts. As a result, Bernays himself is often associated with the less reputable side of public relations.

Let's stop for a moment and rethink the question that frames this section of the chapter. Why does public relations have to have a father? Did it, perhaps, have a mother? Most introductory histories of the profession ignore the fact that Bernays had a female partner in his business who worked closely with him for many decades, and with whom Bernays shared equal credit for the invention of the term "public relations"—his wife, **Doris E. Fleischman**. In the early years of his agency, she was an office manager who "interviewed all job candidates, set up schedules, charted the work being done for different clients, kept the books and paid bills."[9] She was a talented and prodigious writer and organizer, and Bernays quickly made her an equal legal partner in the business. "[F]rom the firm's beginnings in 1919, the two of them developed campaigns together," and Bernays publicly recognized her as his intellectual equal.[10] By all accounts, however, Bernays was a relentless self-promoter, while Fleischman was shy and didn't seek attention. Ironically, the difference between the two of them in terms of their historical reputation within the field of public relations is less about who

contributed more to the field and more about the fact that Bernays engaged in a great deal of public relations on his own behalf.

Perhaps we shouldn't be looking for a single parent of public relations at all. Based on the various histories of media we've been exploring, it should be clear by now that the history of anything—whether it's something tangible like a printing press or something conceptual like public relations—can rarely be encapsulated by talking about a single person. What about the contributions of **Joseph Varney Barker**? In 1934 he formed the first Black-owned public relations firm, offering PR services aimed at Black organizations for the first time. In 1957, **Inez Kaiser** became the first Black woman to own a PR firm. Public relations might have been born years earlier, but was it really grown until all Americans were able to take advantage of its offerings? As several public relations historians have argued, the truth is that no one person really founded public relations. Instead, innovators like Lee, Bernays, Fleischman, Barker, and Kaiser were part of a much larger social, political, and economic evolution that ultimately gave us the modern practice of public relations.

What to Study

KEY WORDS

Public Relations

Declaration of Principles

Crystallizing Public Opinion

The Engineering of Consent

Flacks, spin

Astroturf

Pseudo-event

The Federalist Papers

The Propaganda-Publicity stage

The Publicity Bureau

Early Two-Way Communication period

Committee on Public Information

Public Relations Society of America

Office of War Information

Foreign Agents Registration Act

Advanced Two-Way Communication period

Federal Regulation of Lobbying Act

Public

Lobbying

Greenwashing

Viral marketing

IMPORTANT PEOPLE

Ivy Lee

Theodore Roosevelt

Edward Bernays

Sigmund Freud

Doris E. Fleischman

Joseph Baker Varney

Inez Kaiser

Amos Kendall

George Creel

George Gallup & Elmo Roper

The Helsinki Declaration

QUESTIONS YOU SHOULD BE ABLE TO ANSWER

- What are the problems with the PRSA definition of PR, and what are the benefits of the definition we are using?
- What is the difference between PR and advertising?
- Who was Ivy Lee, what were his contributions to the field of PR, and why is he not universally regarded as the father of PR? What did Theodore Roosevelt have to do with PR?
- Who was Edward Bernays, what were his contributions to the field of PR, and why is he not universally regarded as the father of PR? What did Sigmund Freud have to do with Bernays, and with PR?
- Who was Doris E. Fleischman, and what was her role in the history of PR? Why might she have been the mother of PR?
- Who was Joseph Baker Varney, and what was his most prominent contribution to the field of PR? Who was Inez Kaiser, and what was her most prominent contribution to the field of PR? Who really *was* the father of PR?
- What does it mean to say that "PR has terrible public relations," (or "PR has a PR problem") and why is that true?
- How long ago do we know for sure that public relations practices were in use?
- What was public relations like in the American colonies before the Revolutionary War?
- What are the four historical stages of PR as defined in the chapter, when did they occur, and how do they differ from one another?
- What year was the first modern national political campaign? When was the first corporate public relations department opened and which company opened it? What was the first publicity company, and when did it open?

- What impact did the Great Depression have on public opinion regarding business and industry? How did corporations respond? Roughly when did polling emerge as a PR tool?
- What even prompted the passage of the Foreign Agents Registration Act?
- How many people in the US work in PR? How many PR firms are there in the US? How many of the top 10 largest PR firms globally are located in the US?
- What percentage of the public trusts PR? What percentage does not?
- What is the relationship between PR and journalism in terms of number, pay, and influence? Roughly what percentage of the news we receive begins as PR?

NOTES

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Public Relations

9



Corporate social responsibility at its best. Budweiser converted parts of its manufacturing and distribution operations to manufacture hand sanitizer during the coronavirus pandemic.

Bill Greenblatt/UPI/Alamy Stock Photo

1773 ▶ Boston Tea Party



Library of Congress, [LC-DIG-ds-03379]

1800

1833 ▶ Andrew Jackson hires Amos Kendall, first presidential press secretary

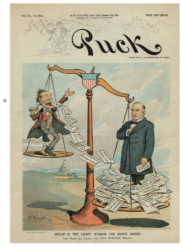


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1850

1896 ▶ William Jennings Bryan and William McKinley launch first national political campaigns

1889 Westinghouse establishes first corporate public relations department



Library of Congress, [LC-DIG-ppmsca-28850]

1900

1906 The Publicity Bureau, first publicity company

1913 Lee's *Declaration of Principles*

1915 Cadillac's Penalty of Leadership

1917 ▶ President Wilson establishes Committee on Public Information

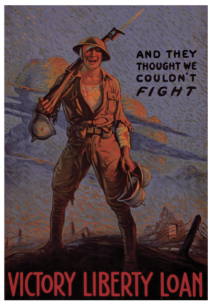
1929 Torches of Liberty

1938 Foreign Agents Registration Act

1941 Office of War Information

1946 Federal Regulation of Lobbying Act

1947 Public Relations Society of America (PRSA); *The Hucksters*



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1950

1954 PRSA Code of Ethics

1962 PRSA accreditation program

1980 ▶ MADD



Tony Freeman/PhotoEdit

2000

2006 TOMS begins buy-one-give-one program

2007 Rise of the transparentists

2013 Lobbyists become government relations professionals

2014 Coalition of PR firms rules out work for climate-change deniers

2019 New Principles of Corporate Governance; the Helsinki Declaration; FTC says fake reviews are illegal

2020 Coronavirus in the US; Clean Creatives campaign

"DRINKING ON A SCHOOL NIGHT? THAT'S NOT LIKE YOU."

"First, you know that I don't drink, school night, weekends, I don't drink. Second, what makes you think I'm drinking?"

"The evidence in plain sight. That's a bottle of Budweiser."

"Yes, it is, but no it isn't. It's not beer. Bud repurposed some of its production and distribution operations to produce and ship hand sanitizer during the coronavirus pandemic. I needed disinfectant, and because I don't drink, buying some from Bud just seemed like a good way to pay them back for good citizenship. You want a shot? This Bud's for you."

"Not on a school night!"

These two friends were joking about one company's public service campaign, an effort mirrored by thousands of other businesses: to do good while burnishing their corporate images, not unimportant at a time when confidence in many of the country's institutions was bit shaky. Nike developed a process to manufacture clear-plastic face shields out of used sneakers; New Balance shoes and clothier Brooks Brothers manufactured masks and gowns; Panera launched Panera Grocery, allowing customers to order essential items such as milk, bread, and fresh produce directly from its vendors; educational materials publisher Scholastic created a free online education hub providing materials for stay at home learning. Restaurants Chipotle, Popeyes, and KFC waived delivery fees for people under stay-at-home orders, and jeans manufacturer Levi's hosted an online concert series featuring artists like Questlove and Jaden Smith to spread a bit of joy.

But it did not take a global pandemic to demonstrate the good that meaningful public relations campaigns could accomplish. Since 2006 TOMS's buy-one-give-one program has delivered tens of millions of pairs of shoes to kids in need, with footwear based on the terrain and weather where they live. Similarly, diaper maker Pampers partners with UNICEF for "1 pack = 1 vaccine," a program to donate one tetanus vaccine for every package it sells. Car maker Subaru and the National Forest Foundation restore lost forests by teaming up to replant 500,000 trees.

In this chapter, we investigate the public relations industry and its relationship with mass media and their audiences. We first define public relations. Then we study its history and development as the profession matured from its beginnings in hucksterism to a full-fledged, communication-based industry. We see how the needs and interests of the profession's various publics became part of the public relations process, and we also define exactly who those publics are. We then detail the scope and nature of the industry and describe the types of public relations activities and the organization of a typical public relations operation. We study trends such as globalization and specialization, as well as the impact of new, converging communication technologies on the industry. Finally, we discuss trust in public relations. As our media literacy skill, we learn how to recognize fake online reviews.

Defining Public Relations

UNICEF and the National Forest Foundation, like Mothers Against Drunk Driving, Save Venice, Inc., Handgun Control Incorporated, the National Environmental Trust, and countless other nonprofit organizations, are interest groups that use a variety of public relations tools and strategies to serve a variety of publics. They want to use public relations to do good. The companies that sponsor their activities also want to do good—for their communities *and* for themselves. Even the most cynical person must applaud their efforts on behalf of helping people in need.

However, for many people, efforts such as these serve to demonstrate one of the ironies of public relations, both as an activity and as an industry: Public relations has terrible public relations. We dismiss some information as "just PR." Public relations professionals are frequently equated with snake oil salespeople, hucksters, and other willful deceivers. They are sometimes referred to both inside and outside the media industries as **flacks**. They are often accused of engaging in **spin**, outright lying or obfuscation. Yet virtually every organization and institution—big and small, public and private, for-profit and volunteer—uses public relations as a regular part of its operation. Many have their own public relations departments; Facebook, for example, has more than 500 full-time employees in its PR department (Marantz, 2020). The term *public relations* often carries such a negative connotation that most independent companies and company PR departments now go by the name "public affairs," "corporate affairs," or "public communications."



▲ *The New Kingdom*, a glossy, 100-page magazine about Saudi Arabia and its new crown prince, was only one of many products of that country's extensive PR efforts to sway Western public opinion.

J. David Ake/AP Images

The problem rests, in part, on confusion over what public relations actually is. As public relations scholar Lee **Edwards (2016)** explains, most definitions of PR stress its potentially positive influence: a "means of exchanging ideas" and "creating and sustaining connections between individuals and groups." However, she writes, "In practice, public relations is most widely used as a strategic tool for corporates and governments to realise [sic] self-interest and advantage in competitive environments—contexts that do not necessarily lend themselves to democratic engagement" (p. 60).

In fact, there is no universally accepted definition of public relations because it can be and is many things—publicity, research, public affairs, media relations, promotion, merchandising, and more. Much of the observable contact media consumers have with public relations occurs when the industry defends people, companies, even countries that have somehow run afoul of the public.

For example, in 2019, investigative reporters revealed that flattering profiles of wealthy and well-connected financier Jeffrey Epstein that appeared in several national publications after his 2009 conviction for soliciting a minor for prostitution were, in fact, written by his PR operation. In these stories, appearing under the names of various publications' own staff, the convicted pedophile was described as a "selfless and forward-thinking philanthropist with an interest in science," never mentioning his legal woes (**Hsu, 2019b**, p. B1).

Buffeted by bad publicity involving its involvement in the 9/11 terror attacks and frequent reports of abuse of women, gay men, lesbians, and businesspeople unfriendly to the throne, Saudi Arabia enlisted a quartet of Western PR firms—the Podesta Group, Qorvis, APCO World, and the Sonoran Policy Group—to burnish its image and that of its leader, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (**Maguire, 2018**). Their efforts produced a wealth of glowing media coverage, including a glossy, 100-page magazine, *The New Kingdom*, on American newsstands.



▼ Save Venice, Inc. is just one of countless nonprofit organizations that use a variety of public relations tools and strategies to do good.

Jordan Dowd

Some PR takes the form of **astroturf** (fake grassroots organizations); their true mission is to thwart government efforts that threaten their funders' profits. For example, Texans for Natural Gas, Alaska's Arctic Energy Center, which advocated increased oil drilling in the Arctic wildlife refuge, and the Main Street Investors Coalition, which warned that climate activism hurts small stock market investors, present themselves as local grassroots organizations. They are actually creations of Washington, D.C., PR firm FTI Consulting, hired by several of the world's largest oil and gas companies to help them promote fossil fuels (**Tabuchi, 2020**).

Beyond the obvious problem of intentional deception, an additional issue for the PR industry as a whole is that such groups sometimes employ **mercenary science**, science-for-hire, contracted out to consulting firms like Exponent and Gradient "to prove that their harmful products aren't harmful" by giving them the quantitative cover of seemingly objective scientific research. "Sometimes you will be working for evildoers and trying to make it seem like they did nothing wrong," explained one Exponent scientist (Spencer, 2020).

But PR, sometimes without drawing attention to itself, often serves the public good. For example, when General Motors was rocked by a 1.6-million-car recall and 13 deaths linked to a faulty ignition switch in 2014, the company took not only to traditional media—letters to customers, blogs, call centers, and news media—in its efforts to better serve its customers and save its reputation, but it also mounted a massive social media public relations campaign—connecting with owners, getting them loaner cars, and even paying for public transit. With the number of suicides spiking among New York city police, the NYPD mounted an internal communication campaign to save officers' lives by reducing the stigma associated with seeking help (Joffe, 2019). The public relations campaign by Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) led directly to passage of tougher standards in virtually every state to remove drunk drivers from the road and to provide stiffer sentences for those convicted of driving under the influence. Dramatic reductions in the number of alcohol-related traffic accidents resulted from this effort. (See the essay "The MADD Campaign.")

"P.R. has a P.R. problem," says Syracuse University public relations professor Brenda Wrigley. "We have to get our own house in order. . . . We are advocates and there's no shame in that as long as it's grounded in ethics and values" (in O'Brien, 2005, p. 31). PR ethicist Shannon Bowen (2017) adds, "To be ethical communicators and leaders, the power of public relations should be used to empower others—to facilitate wise decisions through providing information, by making a range of options possible and actionable, and by serving the interests of society—as well as those of clients." And in a post-pandemic world, "firms will be held to a higher standard," explains industry strategist Alex Slater, "It won't be enough to do the job—the PR industry will join the rest of corporate America in a new era of ethical business practices, philanthropy, pro-bono work, and above-and-beyond community engagement" (2020).

Accepting, therefore, that public relations should be honest, ethical, and employed in the service of others, our definition of public relations is drawn from the Public Relations Society of America's widely accepted definition: "Public relations is a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics" (PRSA, 2020).



USING MEDIA TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

The MADD Campaign

After her child was killed in a drunk-driving accident in 1980, Candy Lightner sought out others like herself, mothers who had lost children to the volatile mix of cars and alcohol. She hoped they could provide one another with emotional support and campaign to

ensure that other parents would never know their grief. Thus, Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) was born.

Among MADD's publics are teenagers. With its parallel organization, Students Against Destructive Decisions (SADD), MADD targets this high-risk group through various educational campaigns and in the media that attract teen audiences. The organization also conducts public information campaigns aimed at adult drivers and repeat drunk drivers, often in conjunction with state and other authorities. It also assists legislators in their efforts to pass drunk-driving legislation. Two more of MADD's publics are public servants such as police and paramedics who must deal with the effects of drunk driving, as well as the families and friends who have lost loved ones in alcohol- or drug-related driving accidents.

Has MADD made a difference? Since 1988, numerous prime-time television programs have featured episodes about the dangers of drunk driving. MADD's professional staff has served as script advisers to these programs. MADD was instrumental in the passage of the federal Drunk Driving Prevention Act of 1988, offering states financial incentives to set up programs that would reduce alcohol- and drug-related automobile fatalities. This legislation also made 21 the national minimum legal drinking age. MADD successfully campaigned for the Victim's Crime Act of 1984, making compensation from drunk drivers to victims and their families federal law.

There are three even more dramatic examples of how successful Lightner's group has been. According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, since the 1980s, drunk-driving fatalities on American roads have decreased by a third (**"Drunk Driving," 2020**). MADD's cultural impact also shows in the way people treat drunk drivers. It is no longer cool to talk about how smashed we got at the party, or how we can't believe we made it home. Almost every evening out with a group of friends includes a designated driver. Drunk drivers today are considered nearly as despicable as child molesters. Many in public relations, traffic safety, and law enforcement credit MADD's public relations efforts with this change.

A third impact is its service as a model for effective, truly grassroots activism. After the 2012 shootings at the Sandy Hook Elementary School that took the lives of 20 young children and 6 adults, distraught PR professional Shannon Watts took to the Internet to get involved, hoping to find something similar to MADD for gun safety. When she could not, she founded what is now known as Moms Demand Action, a growing activist organization with chapters in every state. After the 2018 high school shooting in Parkland, Florida, more than 170,000 additional moms signed on. Moms Demand Action and Mayors Against Illegal Guns joined forces in 2014 to form Everytown for Gun Safety, becoming the largest gun- violence-prevention group in the country (**Karlis, 2018**).

A Short History of Public Relations

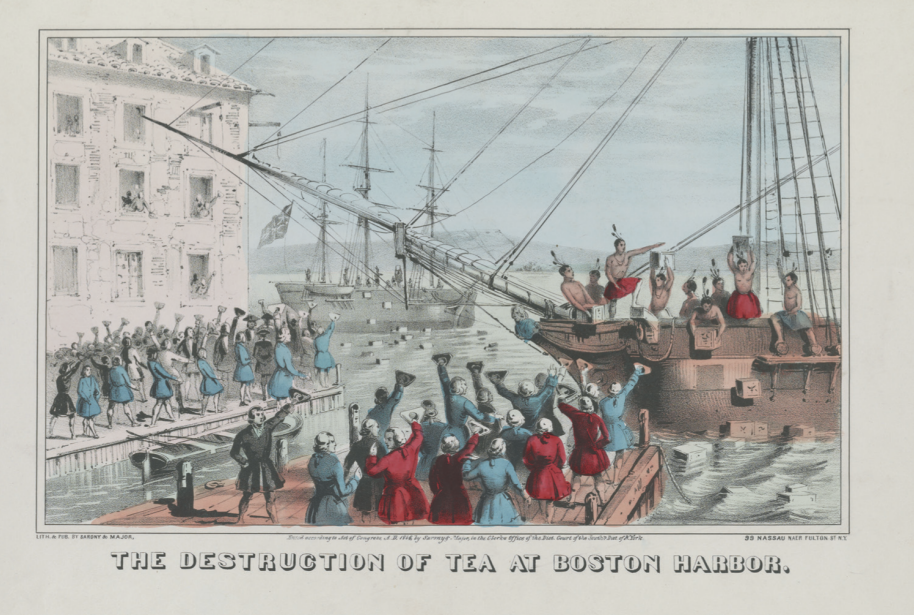
The history of this complex industry can be divided into four stages: early public relations, the propaganda–publicity stage, early two-way communication, and advanced two-way communication. These stages have combined to shape the character of this industry.

Early Public Relations

Archaeologists in Iraq have uncovered a tablet dating from 1800 b.c.e. that today we would call a public information bulletin. It provided farmers with information on sowing, irrigating, and harvesting their crops. Julius Caesar fed the people of the Roman Empire constant reports of his achievements to maintain morale and to solidify his reputation and position of power. Genghis Khan would send "advance men" to tell stories of his might, hoping to frighten his enemies into surrendering.

Public relations campaigns abounded in pre–Revolutionary War America and helped create the colonies. Merchants, farmers, and others who saw advantage in a growing colonial population used overstatement, half-truths, and lies to entice settlers to the New World; *A Brief and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia* by Thomas Hariot and John White was published in 1588 to lure European settlers. The Boston Tea Party was a well-planned media event organized to attract public attention for a vital cause. Today we'd call it a **pseudo-event**, an event staged specifically to attract public attention. Benjamin Franklin organized a sophisticated campaign to thwart the Stamp Act, the Crown's attempt to limit colonial press freedom, using his publications and the oratory skills of criers (see Chapter 3). The *Federalist Papers* of John Jay, James Madison, and Alexander Hamilton were originally a series of 85 letters published between 1787 and 1789, which were designed to sway public opinion in the newly independent United States toward support and passage of the new Constitution, an early effort at issue management. In all these examples, people or organizations were using communication to inform, to build an image, and to influence public opinion.

The Propaganda–Publicity Stage



The December 16, 1773, Boston Tea Party was one of the first successful pseudo-events in the new land. Had cameras been around at the time, it would also have been a fine photo op.

Library of Congress, [LC-DIGds-03379]

Mass circulation newspapers and the first successful consumer magazines appeared in the 1830s, expanding the ability of people and organizations to communicate with the public. In 1833, for example, Andrew Jackson hired former newspaper journalist Amos Kendall as his publicist and the country's first presidential press secretary in an effort to combat the aristocrats who saw Jackson as too common to be president.

Abolitionists sought an end to slavery; industrialists needed to attract workers, entice customers, and enthuse investors; and P. T. Barnum, allegedly convinced that there's a sucker born every minute, worked to lure those suckers into his shows. All of these used the newspaper and the magazine to serve their causes.

Politicians recognized that the expanding press meant that a new way of campaigning was necessary. In 1896, presidential contenders William Jennings Bryan and William McKinley both established campaign headquarters in Chicago from which they issued news releases, position papers, and pamphlets. As a result, the modern national political campaign was born.

It was during this era that public relations began to acquire its deceitful, huckster image. PR was associated more with propaganda than with useful information. A disregard for the public and the willingness of public relations experts to serve the powerful fueled this view, and public relations began to establish itself as a profession during this time. The burgeoning press was its outlet, but westward expansion and rapid urbanization and industrialization in the United States were its driving forces. As the railroad expanded to unite the new nation, cities exploded with new people and new life. Markets, once small and local, became large and national.

As the political and financial stakes grew, business and government became increasingly corrupt and selfish: "The public be damned" was William Vanderbilt's official comment when asked in 1882 about the effects of changing the schedule of his New York Central Railroad (**Gordon, 1989**). The

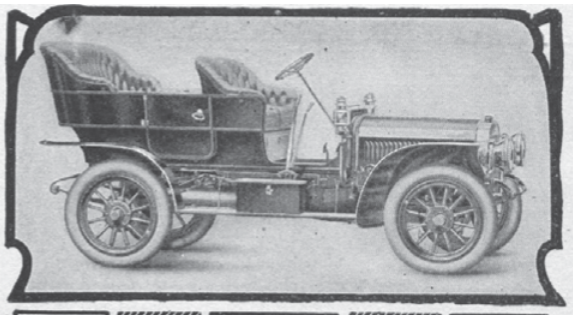
muckrakers' revelations badly tarnished the images of industry and politics. Massive and lengthy coal strikes led to violence and more antibusiness feeling. In the heyday of the journalistic exposé and the muckraking era, government, and business both required some good public relations.

In 1889, Westinghouse Electric established the first corporate public relations department, hiring a former newspaper writer to engage the press and ensure that company positions were always clear and in the public eye. Advertising agencies, including N. W. Ayer & Sons and Lord and Thomas, began to offer public relations services to their clients. The first publicity company, The Publicity Bureau, opened in Boston in 1906 and later expanded to New York, Chicago, Washington, St. Louis, and Topeka to help the railroad industry challenge federal regulations that it opposed.

The railroads also had other problems, and they turned to *New York World* reporter Ivy Lee for help. Beset by accidents and strikes, the Pennsylvania Railroad usually responded by suppressing information. Lee recognized, however, that this was dangerous and counterproductive in a time when the public was already suspicious of big business, including the railroads. Lee escorted reporters to the scene of trouble, established press centers, distributed press releases, and assisted reporters in obtaining additional information and photographs.

When a Colorado coal mine strike erupted in violence in 1913, the press attacked the mine's principal stockholder, New York's John D. Rockefeller Jr., blaming him for the shooting deaths of several miners and their wives and children. Lee handled press relations and convinced Rockefeller to visit the scene to talk (and be photographed) with the strikers. The strike ended, and Rockefeller was soon being praised for his sensitive intervention. Eventually, Lee issued his *Declaration of Principles*, arguing that public relations practitioners should be providers of information, not purveyors of publicity.

Not all public relations at this time was damage control. Henry Ford began using staged events such as auto races to build interest in his cars, started the in-house employee publication *Ford Times*, and made heavy use of image advertising.



New Model H—Four-Cylinder—30 h. p.
$2,500 f. o. b. Detroit—Lamps not included.

A Car of High Degree

The new Model H Cadillac more than justifies expectations. It upholds every tradition of an honored name.

A sturdy, swift, high-grade automobile, beneath whose beautiful finish you recognize

Another

CADILLAC

Triumph

Specially constructed for the motorist—veteran or beginner—whose ideals are realized only in a car of the greatest comfort and luxury and of ample power. A masterpiece of engineering at a price possible only in the largest factory in the world.

Powerful 30 H. P. engine; direct shaft drive; brakes that lock wheels instantly.

A Marvel of Simplicity

Remarkable ease of control—the logical automobile for the owner who wants ***most pleasure and least care.***

Cheerfully demonstrated by your nearest dealer, who will also show you:

Model G—20 h. p. Touring Car 4-Cylinder, $2,000—Described in Catalog GE
Model M—10 h. p. 4-Passenger Car, $950—Described in Catalog ME
Model K—10 h. p. Runabout, $800—Described in Catalog ME

Send for Catalog of Car in which you are interested.

CADILLAC MOTOR CAR COMPANY,
Detroit, Mich.

Member A. L. A. M.

▲ The 1906 Car of High Degree Cadillac campaign was an early but quite successful example of image advertising—using paid ads to build goodwill for a product.

Jay Paull/Archive Photos/Getty Images

Public relations in this stage was typically one-way, from organization to public. Still, by the outbreak of World War I, most of the elements of today's large-scale, multifunction public relations agency were in place.

Early Two-Way Communication

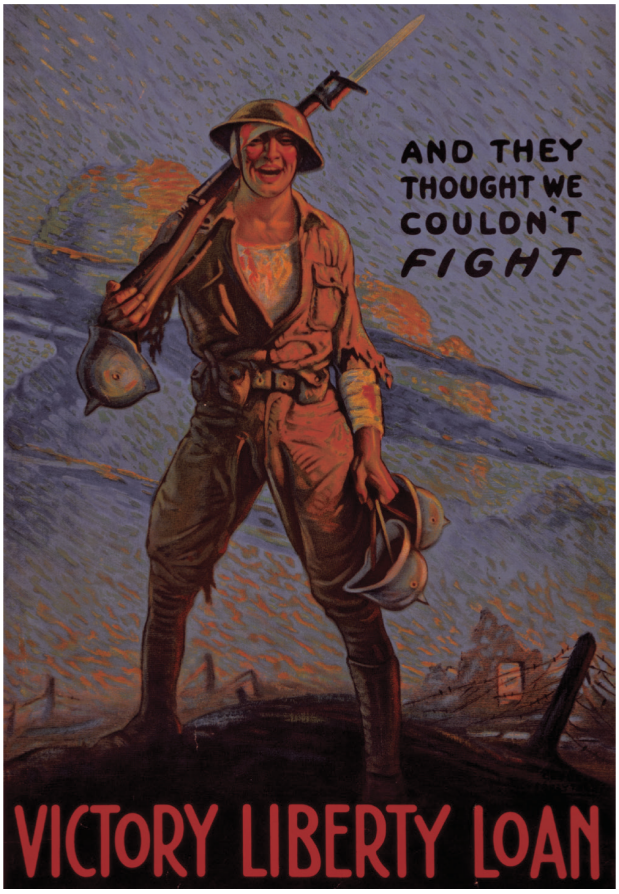
Because the American public was not particularly enthusiastic about the nation's entry into World War I, President Woodrow Wilson recognized the need for public relations in support of the war effort (**Zinn, 1995**, pp. 355–357). In 1917, he placed former newspaper journalist George Creel at the head of the newly formed Committee on Public Information (CPI). Creel assembled opinion leaders from around the country to advise the government on its public relations efforts and to help shape public opinion. The committee sold Liberty Bonds and helped increase membership in the Red Cross. It engaged in public relations on a scale never before seen, using movies, public speakers, articles in newspapers and magazines, and posters.

It was about this time that public relations pioneer Edward Bernays began emphasizing the value of assessing the public's feelings toward an organization. He would then use this knowledge as the basis for the development of the public relations effort. Together with Creel's committee, Bernays's work was the beginning of two-way communication in public relations—that is, public relations practitioners talking to people and, in return, listening to them when they talked back. Public relations professionals began representing their various publics to their clients, just as they represented their clients to those publics.

There were other advances in public relations during this stage. During the 1930s, President Franklin D. Roosevelt, guided by adviser Louis McHenry Howe, embarked on a sophisticated public relations campaign to win support for his then-radical New Deal policies. Central to Roosevelt's effort was the new medium of radio. The Great Depression plaguing the country throughout this decade once again turned public opinion against business and industry. To counter people's distrust, many more corporations established in-house public relations departments; for example, General Motors opened its PR operation in 1931. Public relations professionals turned increasingly to the newly emerging polling industry, founded by George Gallup and Elmo Roper, to better gauge public opinion as they constructed public relations campaigns and to gather feedback on the effectiveness of those campaigns. Gallup and Roper successfully applied newly refined social science research methods—advances in sampling, questionnaire design, and interviewing—to meet the business needs of clients and their publics.

The growth of the industry was significant enough and its reputation so sufficiently fragile that the National Association of Accredited Publicity Directors was founded in 1936. The American Council on Public Relations was established three years later. They merged in 1947, creating the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), the principal professional group for today's public relations professionals.

World War II saw the government undertake another massive campaign to bolster support for the war effort, this time through the Office of War Information (OWI). Employing techniques that had proven successful during World War I, the OWI had the additional advantage of public opinion polling, fully established and powerful radio networks and their stars, and a Hollywood eager to help. Singer Kate Smith's war-bond radio fundraiser brought in millions, and director Frank Capra produced the *Why We Fight* film series for the OWI.



▼ World War I brought government into large-scale public relations. Even today, the CPI's posters—like this one encouraging citizens to support the war effort through war bonds—are recognized.

Library of Congress, [LCUSZC4-10221]

During this era, both public relations and Ivy Lee suffered a serious blow to their reputations. Lee was the American public relations spokesman for Germany and its leader, Adolf Hitler. In 1934, Lee was required to testify before Congress to defend himself against charges that he was a Nazi sympathizer. He was successful, but the damage had been done. As a result of Lee's ties with Germany, Congress passed the Foreign Agents Registration Act in 1938, requiring anyone who engages in political activities in the United States on behalf of a foreign power to register as an agent of that power with the Justice Department.



▲ Better known for hits such as *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* and *It's a Wonderful Life*, director Frank Capra brought his moviemaking talents to the government's efforts to explain US involvement in World War II and to overcome Americans' isolationism. His *Why We Fight* documentary series still stands as a classic of the form.

Courtesy Everett Collection

Advanced Two-Way Communication

Post–World War II US society was confronted by profound social change and expansion of the consumer culture. It became increasingly important for organizations to know what their clients were thinking, what they liked and disliked, and what concerned and satisfied them. As a result, public relations turned even more decidedly toward integrated twoway communication, employing research, advertising, and promotion.

As the public relations industry became more visible, it opened itself to closer scrutiny. Best-selling novels such as *The Hucksters* and *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (and the hit movies made from them) painted a disturbingly negative picture of the industry and those who worked in it. Vance Packard's bestselling book *The Hidden Persuaders*, dealing with both public relations and advertising, further eroded PR esteem. As a result of public distrust of the profession, Congress passed the Federal Regulation of Lobbying Act in 1946, requiring, among other things, that those who deal with federal employees on behalf of private clients disclose those relationships. And as the industry's conduct and ethics came under increasing attack, the PRSA responded with a code of ethics in 1954 and an accreditation program in 1962. Both, with modification and improvement, stand today.

Public relations's contemporary era is characterized by other events as well. More people buying more products meant that greater numbers of people were coming into contact with a growing number of businesses. As consumer markets grew in size, the basis of competition changed. Texaco, for example, used advertising to sell its gasoline. But because its gasoline was not all that different from that of

other oil companies, it also sold its fuel using its good name and reputation. Increasingly, then, advertising agencies began to add public relations divisions. This change served to blur the distinction between advertising and PR.



▸ Criticism of public relations found its way into the cultural forum through a number of popular films and books. This scene is from the movie *The Hucksters.*

Courtesy Everett Collection

Women, who had proved their capabilities in all professional settings during World War II, became prominent in the industry. Anne Williams Wheaton was associate press secretary to President Eisenhower, and Leone Baxter was president of the powerful public relations firm Whitaker and Baxter. Companies and their executives and politicians increasingly turned to television to polish their images and shape public opinion. Nonprofit, charitable, and social activist groups also mastered the art of public relations. The latter used public relations especially effectively to counter the PR power of targeted businesses. Environmentalist, civil rights and women's rights groups, and safety and consumer advocate organizations were successful in moving the public toward their positions and, in many cases, toward action.

Shaping the Character of Public Relations

Throughout these four stages in the development of public relations, several factors combined to shape the identity of public relations, influence the way the industry does its job, and clarify the necessity for PR in the business and political world.

Advances in technology. Advances in industrial technology made possible the mass production, distribution, and marketing of goods. Advances in communication technology (and their proliferation) made it possible to communicate more efficiently and effectively with ever larger and more specific audiences.

Growth of the middle class. A growing middle class, better educated and more aware of the world around it, required more and better information about people and organizations.

Growth of organizations. As business, organized labor, and government grew bigger after World War II, the public saw them as more powerful and more remote. As a result, people were naturally curious and suspicious about these forces that seemed to be influencing all aspects of their lives.

Better research tools. The development of sophisticated research methodologies and statistical techniques allowed the industry to know its audiences better and to better judge the effectiveness of its campaigns.

Professionalization. Numerous national and international public relations organizations helped professionalize the industry and burnish its reputation.

Public Relations and Its Audiences

Virtually all of us consume public relations messages on a daily basis. Increasingly, the video clips we see on the local evening news are provided by a public relations firm or the PR department of some company or organization. The content of many of the stories we read online or hear on local radio news comes directly from PR-provided press releases. As one media relations firm explained in a promotional piece sent to prospective clients, "The media are separated into two categories. One is content and the other is advertising. They're both for sale. Advertising can be purchased directly from the publication or through an ad agency, and the content space you purchase from PR firms" (quoted in **Jackson & Hart, 2002**, p. 24). In addition, the feed-the-hungry campaign we support, the poster encouraging us toward safer sex, and the corporation-sponsored art exhibit we attend are all someone's public relations effort.

Public relations professionals interact with seven categories of publics, and a **public** is any group of people with a stake in an organization, issue, or idea. Who are those publics?

Employees. An organization's employees are its lifeblood, its family. Good public relations begins at home with company newsletters, social events, and internal and external recognition of superior performance.

Stockholders. Stockholders own the organization (if it is a public corporation). They are "family" as well, and their goodwill is necessary for the business to operate. Annual reports and stockholder meetings provide a sense of belonging as well as information.

Communities. An organization has neighbors where it operates. Courtesy, as well as good business sense, requires that an organization's neighbors are treated with consideration and support. Information meetings, company-sponsored safety and food drives, and open houses strengthen ties between organizations and their neighbors.

Media. Very little communication with an organization's various publics can occur without the trust and goodwill of professionals in the mass media. Press packets, briefings, and the facilitation of access to an organization's newsmakers build that trust and goodwill.

Government. Government is "the voice of the people" and, as such, deserves the attention of any organization that deals with the public. From a practical perspective, governments have the power to tax, regulate, and zone. Organizations must earn and maintain the goodwill and trust of the government. The providing of information and access through reports, position papers, and meetings with official personnel keeps the government informed and builds trust in an organization. The government is also the target of many PR efforts, as organizations and their lobbyists seek favorable legislation and other action.

Investment community. Corporations are under the constant scrutiny of those who invest their own or others' money or make recommendations on investment. The value of a business and its ability to grow are functions of the investment community's respect for and trust in it. As a result, all PR efforts that build an organization's good image speak to that community.

Customers. Consumers pay the bills for companies through their purchase of products or services. Their goodwill is invaluable. That makes good PR, in all its forms, invaluable.

Scope and Structure of the Public Relations Industry

Today some 275,000 people in the United States identify themselves as working in public relations (**Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021**), and virtually every major American company or organization has a public relations department, some housing as many as 400 employees. There are over 45,364 public relations firms in the United States, the largest employing as many as 2,000 people. Most, however, have fewer employees, some employing only a few people. American PR firms had $14.5 billion in revenue in 2020 (**"Public Relations Firms," 2020**). **Figure 9.1** shows the 10 largest public relations firms globally.

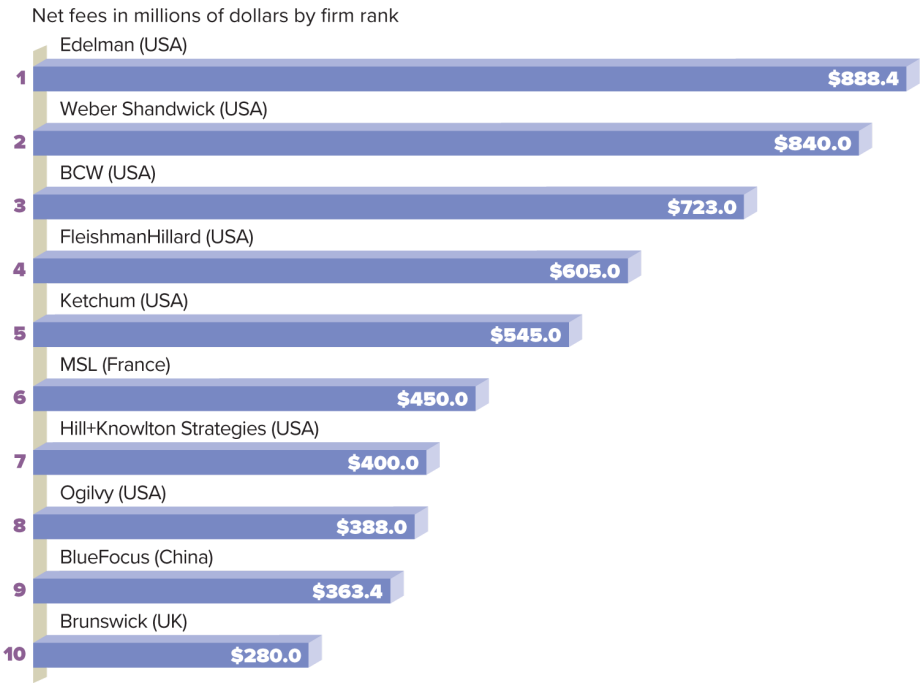


Figure 9.1 The 10 Largest PR Firms Globally, 2019.

Source: "Top 10 Global," 2020.

There are full-service public relations firms and those that provide only special services. Media specialists for company CEOs, Web commentary monitoring services, and makers of **video news releases (VNRs)**, preproduced reports about a client or its product that are distributed free of charge to television stations, are special service providers. Public relations firms bill for their services in a number of ways. They may charge an hourly rate for services rendered, or they may be on call, charging clients a monthly fee to act as their public relations counsel. Hill+Knowlton, for example, charges a minimum fee of several thousand dollars a month. Another way to bill is through **fixed-fee arrangements**, wherein the firm performs a specific set of services for a client for a specific and prearranged fee. Finally, many firms bill for **collateral materials**, adding a surcharge as high as 17.65% for handling printing, research, and photographs. For example, if it costs $3,000 to have a poster printed, the firm charges the client $3,529.50 to cover the cost of the poster plus 17.65% of that cost.

Public Relations Activities

Regardless of the way public relations firms bill their clients, they earn their fees by offering all or some of these 14 interrelated services.

1. *Community relations.* This type of public affairs work focuses on the communities in which the organization exists. If a city wants to build a new airport, for example, those whose property will be taken or devalued must be satisfied. If they are not, widespread community opposition to the project may develop.
2. *Counseling.* Public relations professionals routinely offer advice to an organization's management concerning policies, relationships, and communication with its various publics. Management must tell its publics "what we do." Public relations helps in the creation, refinement, and presentation of that messaging.
3. *Development/fundraising.* All organizations, commercial and nonprofit, survive through the voluntary contributions in time and money of their members, friends, employees, supporters, and others. Public relations helps demonstrate the need for those contributions.
   This **corporate social responsibility** (CSR), the integration of business operations and organizational values, sometimes takes the form of **cause marketing**—work in support of social issues and causes. The importance of CSR to clients is evidenced by the fact that 63% of consumers view brands more favorably if they stand up for social causes and 64% do so if those brands donate to those causes (**"Year End Report," 2021**). But does CSR represent a sincere effort to serve a company's publics or is it mere window dressing? You can enter the debate after reading the essay "Expression of a Company's Values or 'Just More PR'."
4. *Employee/member relations.* This form of public relations responds specifically to the concerns of an organization's employees or members and its retirees and their families. The goal is maintenance of high morale and motivation, and as we saw earlier in the case of the NYPD, even to save lives.
5. *Financial relations.* Practiced primarily by corporate organizations, financial PR is the enhancement of communication between investor-owned companies and their shareholders, the financial community (for example, banks, annuity groups, and investment firms), and the public. Much corporate strategy, such as expansion into new markets and acquisition of other companies, is dependent upon good financial public relations.
6. *Government affairs.* This type of public affairs work focuses on government agencies. **Lobbying**—directly interacting to influence elected officials or government regulators and agents—is often a central activity. The term *lobbyist*, however, has developed a bit of a negative connotation. As such, in 2013 the American League of Lobbyists changed its name to the Association of Government Relations Professionals, and its members, no longer *lobbyists*, became *government relations professionals* (**Clines, 2013**).
7. *Industry relations.* Companies must interact not only with their own customers and stockholders but also with other companies in their line of business, both competitors and suppliers. In addition, they must also stand as a single voice in dealing with various state and federal regulators. For example, groups as disparate as the Texas Restaurant Association, the American Petroleum Institute, and the National Association of Manufacturers all require public relations in dealing with their various publics. The goal is the maintenance and prosperity of the industry as a whole.

8. *Issues management.* Often an organization is as interested in influencing public opinion about some larger issue that will eventually influence its operation as it is in the improvement of its own image. Issues management typically uses a large-scale public relations campaign designed to move or shape opinion on a specific issue. Usually the issue is an important one that generates deep feelings. Anti-death-penalty activists, for example, employ a full range of communication techniques to sway people to their side. Exxon-Mobil frequently secures paid media placements that address environmentalism and public transportation—important issues in and of themselves, but also important to the future of a leading manufacturer of fossil fuels.
9. *Media relations.* As the number of media outlets grows and as advances in technology increase the complexity of dealing with them, clients require help in understanding the various media, in preparing and organizing materials for them, and in placing those materials. In addition, media relations requires that the public relations practitioner maintain good relationships with professionals in the media, understand their deadlines and other constraints, and earn their trust.
10. *Marketing communication.* This is a combination of activities designed to promote a product, service, or idea. It can include the creation of advertising; generation of publicity and promotion; design of packaging, point-of-sale displays, and trade show presentations; and design and execution of special events. Advertising becomes a public relations function when its goal is to build an image or to motivate action, as opposed to its usual function of selling products. The Ad Council's seat-belt safety campaign featuring the Crash Test Dummies is a well-known, successful public relations advertising campaign.

It is important to note that PR professionals often use advertising but that the two are not the same. The difference is one of control. Advertising is controlled communication—advertisers pay for ads to appear in specific media exactly as they want; it is *paid* media. PR tends to be less controlled; it is *earned* media. A PR firm, for example, cannot control how or when its client's announcement of a new minority outreach effort is reported by the local paper. It cannot control how the media report Nike's ongoing insistence that it has rectified reported worker abuses in its overseas shops.

But that does not mean that the success of earned media cannot be assessed, given AI-driven measurement technologies, such as PRophet, which sample millions of reporters' stories across tens of thousands of outlets for evidence of a piece of earned media's reach (**Faw, 2020**).



▾ You might recognize the Crash Test Dummies, seen here at their introduction into the Smithsonian National Museum of American History, from their long-running seat-belt safety public relations advertising campaign.

Bill O'Leary/The Washington Post/ Getty Images

Advertising and public relations obviously overlap for manufacturers of consumer products. Chevrolet must sell cars, but it must communicate with its various publics as well. General Motors, too, must sell cars, but in the wake of the ignition switch recall, it needed serious public relations help.

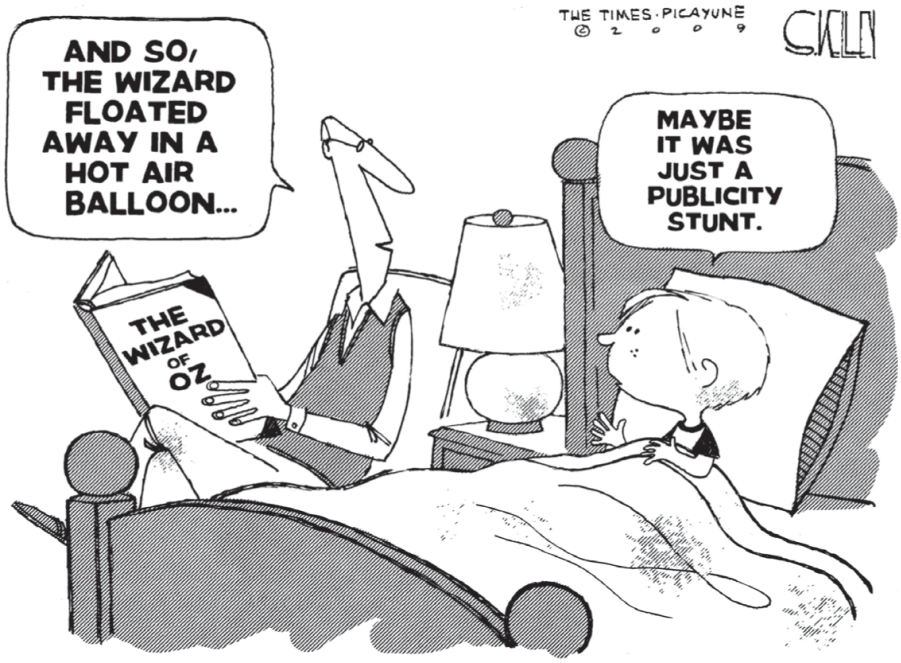
One result of the overlap of advertising and public relations is that most big adver tising agencies house their own public relations divisions and most big PR agencies now produce paid media. For example, nearly a third of Edelman's business is brand marketing; the ratio is 50% at Weber Shandwick. "The industry has moved beyond an ecosystem of neatly defined channel or specialist providers" explains industry analyst Jay Pattisall. "Strategically, marketers are asking for more integrated and holistic marketing solutions that bring together the content and the context" (in **Rittenhouse, 2019**, p. 18).

Another way that advertising and public relations differ is that advertising people typically do not set policy for an organization. Advertising people *execute* policy after organization leaders set it. In contrast, public relations professionals usually are part of the policy-making process because they are the liaison between the organization and its publics. Effective organizations have come to understand that even in routine decisions the impact on public opinion and subsequent consequences can be of tremendous importance. As a result, public relations has become a management function, and a public relations professional typically sits as a member of a company's highest level of management. You'll soon read more about this.

11. *Minority relations/multicultural affairs.* Public affairs activities are directed toward specific racial and ethnic minorities in this type of work. For example, in the summer of 2020, as ongoing protests in the wake of the murder of George Floyd were building public support for the Black Lives Matter

movement, Starbucks drew global criticism by forbidding its employees from wearing Black Lives Matter t-shirts, buttons, and other supporting paraphernalia while at work. A move designed to limit potential conflict in its coffee shops was seen as hypocritical given the company's social media support of the protestors. With its much-valued progressive image in jeopardy, its response had to be quick and effective. Its PR operation made sure it was. The ban was quickly rescinded; it issued a very public statement of support: "We see you. We hear you. Black Lives Matter. That is a fact and will never change. This movement is a catalyst for change, and right now, it's telling us a lot of things need to be addressed so we can make space to heal"; and the company even introduced its own line of Black Lives Matter-themed apparel (**Adams, 2020**).

12. *Public affairs.* The public affairs function includes interacting with officials and leaders of the various power centers with whom a client must deal. Community and government officials and leaders of pressure groups are likely targets of this form of public relations. Public affairs emphasizes social responsibility and building goodwill, such as when a company donates money for a computer lab at the local high school.
13. *Special events and public participation.* Public relations can be used to stimulate interest in an organization, person, or product through a well-planned, focused "happening," an activity designed to facilitate interaction between an organization and its publics. The ubiquitous 5K and 10K charity fun runs are only one example.
14. *Research.* Organizations often must determine the attitudes and behaviors of their various publics in order to plan and implement the activities necessary to influence or change those attitudes and behaviors.



Special events are an important public relations activity.

Steve Kelley Editorial Cartoon used with the permission of Steve Kelley and Creators Syndicate. All rights reserved.

CULTURAL FORUM

Expression of a Company's Values or "Just More PR?"

The CSR movement reached its zenith with the August 2019 agreement by 181 American companies belonging to the Business Roundtable to accept new Principles of Corporate Governance. Their CEO's agreed "to lead their companies for the benefit of all stakeholders— customers, employees, suppliers, communities, and shareholders." Observers called this explicit articulation of CSR "a historical milestone" (**Goodman, 2020**, p. B1), the moment when corporate executives "explicitly rebuked the notion that the role of the corporation is to maximize profits at all costs" (**Forbes, 2019**).

There were, however, skeptics. They argued that CSR serves primarily as a distraction from corporations' more egregious practices; companies can do all the cause marketing they want, but their lobbying efforts and political donations are a truer expression of their real values; CSR is designed primarily to ward off government regulation; it offers little more than convenient opportunities for good PR with small costs to companies' bottom lines. Critics pointed to Facebook, whose stated corporate purpose is to "give people the power to build community and bring the world together." Media literate Internet users are more than aware that this social media site, along with others, is a source of much cultural and political divisiveness, in fact, prospering precisely by defying its expressed values (see **Chapter 13**).

Already in the cultural forum, the temperature on this debate was raised by COVID-19. We've seen elsewhere in this chapter that scores of companies stepped up during the coronavirus pandemic, putting profit second to social responsibility. Yet new-Principles-of-Corporate-Governance signatory Marriott International Hotels, which earned $1.2 billion in 2019, furloughed most of its US workers, leaving them without access to health care, while paying out more than $160 million in quarterly dividends and pursuing a raise for its CEO. Another signatory, Amazon, valued at over $1 trillion, saw protests outside many of its warehouses from workers angry that the company refused to provide them protective gear and hand sanitizer, exposing them to undue risk.

But other signers did stay true to their word. Bank of America and Wells Fargo vowed to avoid layoffs; JP Morgan Chase paid cash bonuses to its lower-paid employees; Apple paid employees and contract workers even though its stores were closed; Pepsi boosted employees' sick pay while continuing to pay workers forced to stay home to tend to children (all in **Goodman, 2020**).

Enter Your Voice

- CSR, cause marketing, new Principles of Corporate Governance—are they expressions of a company's true values or "just more PR"?

- If some companies that practice CSR meet their social responsibilities but others do not, should that call into question the entire practice?
- Consumers want the companies with whom they interact to practice CSR and reward those that do, but there is also evidence that it positively impacts employee morale, leading to higher levels of worker productivity and retention; that it helps attract better job applicants; and that it builds up a stock of goodwill with the media and the public that can help a company weather a later PR crisis (**Hill, 2019**). So with all these demonstrated benefits, why would a company that has made a public CSR commitment not follow through?

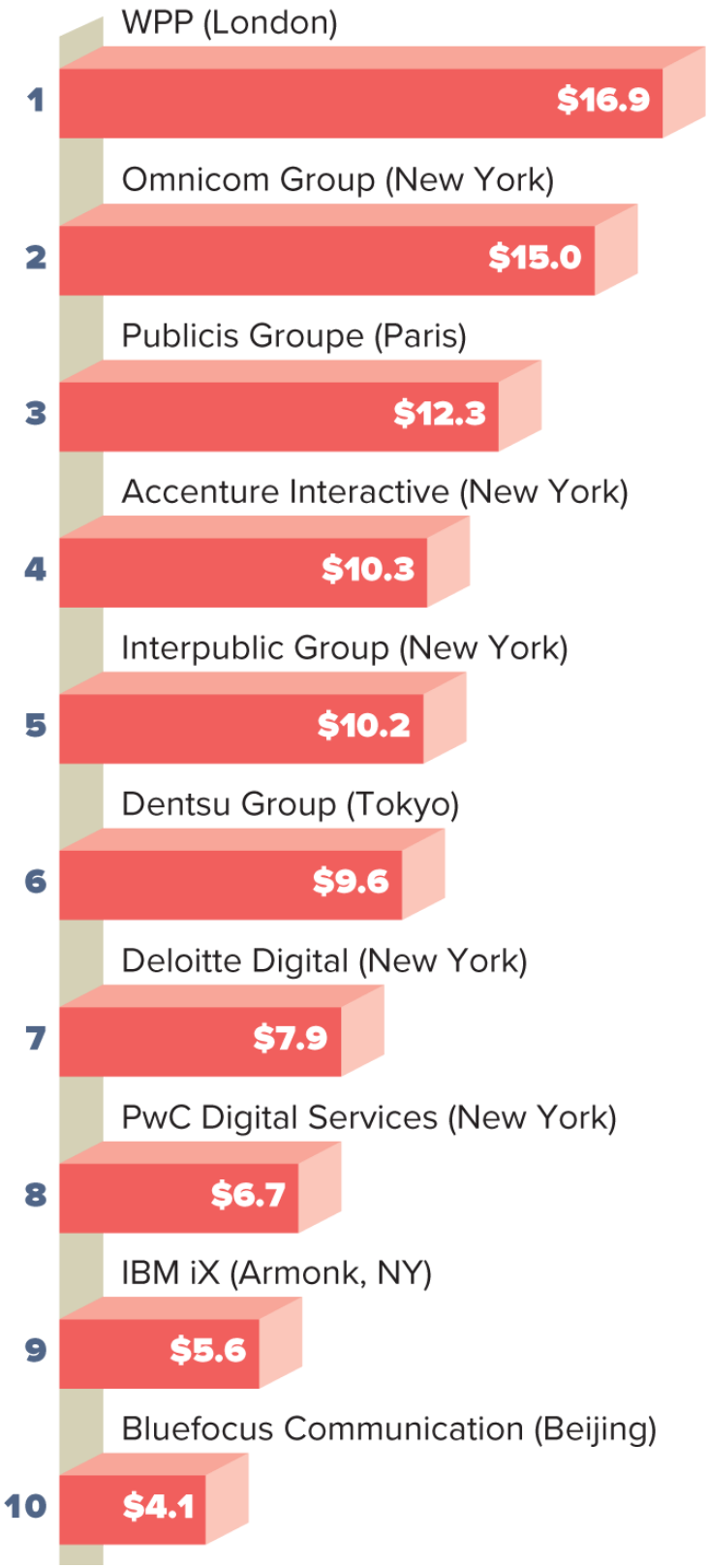
Trends and Convergence in Public Relations

As you've read throughout this text, digital technologies—the Internet, the Web, and social media—are altering the relationship between media and their audiences. In those instances, what was once primarily one-way communication—content producer to audience member—is increasingly becoming a conversation. Modern public relations, although already a conversation based on the two-way flow of communication, is equally susceptible to digital technologies' transformative influence.

Globalization, Concentration, and Specialization

As they have in the media industries themselves, globalization and concentration have come to public relations in the form of foreign ownership, reach of PR firms' operations into foreign countries, and the collection of several different companies into giant marketing organizations. Dentsu Aegis Network alone has 38,000 employees serving clients in more than 145 countries. New York–based independent Edelman PR has 6,000 employees in 60 offices around the world. Marketing giant Omnicom Group operates in 100 countries, has over 70,000 employees, and serves more than 5,000 clients through the more than 1,500 agencies it controls. It accomplishes this with 3 of the world's top-7-earning PR firms and several specialty PR shops (for example, Brodeur Worldwide, Clark & Weinstock, Gavin Anderson & Company, and Cone). Omnicon is also parent to several national and international advertising agencies, including several of the industry's top global earners (for example, BBDO Worldwide, DDB Worldwide, and Rapp); several media planning and buying companies; event branding and planning companies; outdoor, direct marketing, and online advertising specialty shops; and the global marketing company Diversified Agency Services, which itself is home to more than 200 companies offering services through its 700 offices in 71 countries. Four of the world's 10 largest marketing organizations have ownership outside the United States, as you can see in **Figure 9.2**.

Net fees in millions of dollars by rank and company headquarters



▼ **Figure 9.2** World's 10 Largest Marketing Companies, 2019.

Source: ***"Agency Companies," (2020)***.

Another trend in public relations is specialization. We've seen the 14 activities of public relations professionals, but specialization can expand that list. This specialization takes two forms. The first is defined by issue. Environmental public relations is attracting ever-larger numbers of people, both environmentalists and industrialists. E. Bruce Harrison Consulting attracts corporate clients in part because of its reputation as a firm with superior **greenwashing** skills. That is, Harrison is particularly adept at countering the public relations efforts aimed at its clients by environmentalists. Health care and pharmaceuticals has also recently emerged as a significant public relations specialty.

Another, unfortunate in label as well as specialization, are companies that practice **black PR**, firms that "use every tool and take every advantage available in order to change reality according to [their] client's wishes" (**Silverman, Lytvynenko, & Kung, 2020**). It is the unethical use of mass communication to misinform. Operating worldwide, these firms traffic in fake social media accounts, false narratives, fake fact-checking pages, and counterfeit local news websites (referred to as *pink slime journalism*; **Bengani, 2020**), all for the right price. Some noted practitioners are the Archimedes Group in Israel, Pragmatico in the Ukraine, KOI in Puerto Rico, and Smaat in Saudi Arabia. Their existence has generated a reckoning in the PR industry as you'll soon read.

Convergence

The second impetus driving specialization has to do with the increasing number of media outlets used in public relations campaigns that rely on new and converging technologies. Online information and advertising and a social media presence are major parts of the total public relations media mix, as are video news releases. In addition, Web publishing has greatly expanded the number and type of available media outlets. All require professionals with specific skills.

The public relations industry has responded to the convergence of traditional media with the Internet in other ways as well. One is the development of **integrated marketing communications (IMC)**. We saw earlier how advertising and PR often overlap, but in IMC, firms actively combine public relations, marketing, advertising, and promotion functions into a more or less seamless communication campaign that is as at home on the Web as it is on the television screen and magazine page. The goal of this integration is to provide the client and agency with greater control over communication (and its interpretation) in an increasingly fragmented but synergized media environment. For example, a common IMC tactic is to employ **viral marketing**, a strategy that relies on targeting specific Internet users with a given communication and relying on them to spread the word through the communication channels with which they are most comfortable. This is IMC, and it is inexpensive and effective.

But the Internet also provides various publics with the means to challenge even the best public relations effort. Tony Juniper of the British environmental group Friends of the Earth calls the Internet "the most potent weapon in the toolbox of resistance." As Peter Verhille of PR giant Entente International explains, "One of the major strengths of pressure groups—in fact the leveling factor in their confrontation with powerful companies—is their ability to exploit the instruments of the telecommunication revolution. Their agile use of global tools such as the Internet reduces the advantages that corporate budgets once provided" (both quotes from **Klein, 1999**, pp. 395–396).

For example, the Internet is central to United Students Against Sweatshops's ongoing efforts to monitor the child labor, safety, and working conditions of US apparel and shoe manufacturers' overseas operations. USAS used the Internet to build a nationwide network of students that organized protests and boycotts, resulting in several victories—for example, forcing Nike and Reebok to allow workers at one of its Mexican factories to unionize. Public relations agencies and in-house PR departments have responded in a number of ways. One is IMC. Another is the hiring of in-house Web monitors; a third way is the growth of specialty firms such as eWatch, whose function is to alert clients to negative references on the Web and suggest effective countermeasures.

Trust in Public Relations

We began our discussion of public relations with the industry's self-admission that the profession sometimes bears a negative reputation. Edward Bernays's call for greater sensitivity to the wants and needs of the various publics and Ivy Lee's insistence that public relations be open and honest were the industry's first steps away from its huckster roots. The post–World War II code of ethics and accreditation programs were a second and more important step. Yet Bernays himself was dissatisfied with the profession's progress. The father of public relations died in 1995 at the age of 103. He spent the greater part of his last years demanding that the industry, especially the PRSA, police itself. For example, in 1986, Bernays wrote that in professions such as the law and medicine, unethical practice can result in "disbarment." But PR has no formal standards, making "it possible for anyone, regardless of education or ethics, to use the term 'public relations' to describe his or her function" (p. 11).

Many people in the profession share Bernays's concern, especially because the public's ambivalence toward PR—only 12% of the public trusts public relations and 69% do not—may not be completely misplaced. The industry's own research shows that 28% of PR professionals would "manufacture news" to benefit a client and 54% are willing to "tell white lies" (**Loechner, 2018**). As a result, Laurence Evans, chief executive of PR firm Reputation Leaders, is adamant about restoring trust in PR, declaring that "distrust is bad for business. High levels of public distrust affect PR businesses, from recruitment to the regulatory environment they inhabit. In addition, PR professionals depend on public credibility to get their clients' message across" (**Griggs, 2015**).

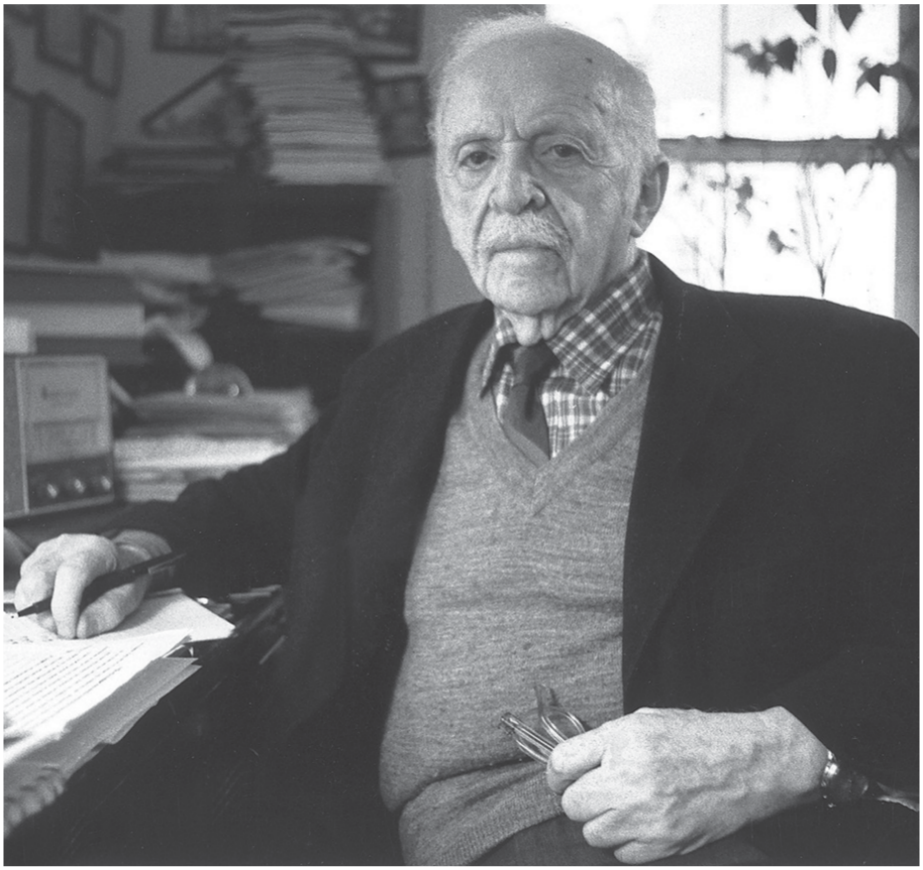
The industry has responded in a number of ways. One is in its choice of clients. For example, a coalition of several of the world's top 25 PR firms mutually agreed in 2014 to no longer work for clients who would use their services to deny climate change (**Goldenberg & Karim, 2014**). In 2020, a group of activist executives launched the Clean Creatives campaign to encourage PR professionals to force their companies to drop fossil fuel clients and their industry front groups (**Peters, 2020**), resulting in firms like global giant Forsman & Bodenfors ceasing work for oil and gas producers, as well as utility companies and their lobbyists (**Hsu, 2021**). Additionally, many agencies have faced internal revolts over working with anti-immigration organizations, with Edelman going as far as to drop its work for the GEO Group, operators of the migrant children detention centers for the federal government (**Hsu, 2019a**).

The trust issue has also given greater voice to the **transparentists**. In reaction to industry embarrassment at the discovery that Walmart's and Sony's PR operations were paying authors of fake blogs **(flogs)** to promote their brands (and attack competitors'), the transparentists demanded that the profession "adopt a position of full and total disclosure, driven by the innate openness and

accessibility to information available on the Internet." If public relations is to hold consumer (and client) trust, PR executive Eric Webber (2007) argued, its practitioners must recognize that "it's too easy now for journalists, pro and amateur alike, to figure out when companies and their PR people lie, so we'd better tell the truth" (p. 8). As such, this second response to building renewed trust is the call for an industry-wide commitment to the Three Ts: transparency, truthfulness, and timeliness (Bashe, 2020) A third response, especially as the industry as a whole is diminished by unethical practices like black PR, is to publicly reaffirm, with specifics, the industry's commitment to ethical operation. This was the impetus behind the 2019 establishment of the Helsinki Declaration by the International Communications Consultancy Organisation [sic], an umbrella organization representing PR trade groups around the world. It established 10 principles:

1. To work ethically and in accordance with applicable laws;
2. To observe the highest professional standards in the practice of public relations and communications;
3. To respect the truth, dealing honestly and transparently with employees, colleagues, clients, the media, government, and the public;
4. To protect the privacy rights of clients, organizations, and individuals by safeguarding confidential information;
5. To be mindful of their duty to uphold the reputation of the industry;
6. To be forthcoming about sponsors of causes and interests and never engage in misleading practices such as "astroturfing";
7. To be aware of the power of social media, and use it responsibly;
8. To never engage in the creation of or knowingly circulate fake news;
9. To adhere to their Association's Code of Conduct, be mindful of the Codes of Conduct of other countries, and show professional respect at all times;
10. To take care that their professional duties are conducted without causing offence [sic] on the grounds of gender, ethnicity, origin, religion, disability, or any other form of discrimination (ICCO, 2020).

Still, today in the United States, PR professionals outnumber journalists six to one (Walley-Wiegert, 2021), and because of the economic stress on the traditional press that you've read about throughout this text, they are better paid, better financed, and better equipped. Estimates are that 75% of the news we receive begins as PR (Jansen, 2017). "The widening employment and income disparities have left journalists underpaid, overworked, and increasingly unable to undertake independent, in-depth reporting," write the Center for Public Integrity's Erin Quinn and Chris Young (2015). As a result, many news organizations that once engaged in serious coverage of important topics, such as science and health, no longer have the resources to do so adequately, "and special interests have filled the void." This puts a particularly heavy burden on public trust because, as many PR professionals argue, the only bad public relations effort is one that people recognize as PR. Therefore, the "best" PR is invisible.



▲ The father of public relations, Edward Bernays, used the last years of his long career and life to campaign for improved industry ethics.

Bettmann/Getty Images

Nonetheless, if people *are* lied to by public relations, the cultural implications could not be more profound, especially if the lying is invisible. What becomes of the negotiation function of culture, wherein we debate and discuss our values and interests in the cultural forum, if public relations gives some voices advantages not available to others? One remedy for this potential problem is that consumers must make themselves aware of the sources of information and the process by which it is produced. As we've seen throughout this book, nothing less would be expected of a media-literate person.

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Introduction to Chapter 10

About This Chapter

The upcoming chapter does an excellent job reviewing the history of film and describing the medium and the industry as they exist today. In this introduction, there is only one subject that needs further elaboration: the story of famed photographer and innovator Eadweard Muybridge. The upcoming chapter unfortunately repeats a popular but false story about Muybridge and his most famous accomplishment, so it is the task of the introduction to correct that mistake.

WHAT TO FOCUS ON

Pay attention to the information in this introduction. Focus on the “Short History of the Movies” section in the chapter itself. The first two paragraphs under the “Movies and Their Audiences” section are also important, as is the beginning of “The Scope and Nature of the Film Industry” and its first subsection, “Three Component Systems.” Also focus on “Recognizing Product Placements.”

Introductory Information About Film

Who Was Eadweard Muybridge, and What Was He Doing With That Horse?

There is a story about Eadweard Muybridge that has been told countless times in books and magazine articles. It goes like this. In the late 1800s, there was a massive debate about the theory of "unsupported transit"—the idea that when a horse gallops, there are moments when all four of its hooves leave the ground at the same time. Industrialist and former governor of California Leland Stanford made a bet that no one could prove this theory true, and offered $25,000 to anyone who could meet the challenge. In 1877, Eadweard Muybridge finally claimed the cash prize with a series of photographs of a horse in motion. These pictures represented a huge breakthrough in motion picture technology, and led to the development of the film industry. All because of a bet. It's a great story. The only problem is that very little of it is true.

Eadweard Muybridge was born in 1830 in the British town of Kingston upon Thames. His name at birth was Edward Muggeridge, though he changed it several times throughout his life. In 1852, he set sail for America. Arriving in New York, he got a job as an Agent for the London Printing & Publishing Company, and went into the business of importing books from England. While in New York, Muybridge befriended a photographer (Silas Wright Selleck) who had also begun his career as a bookseller. When Selleck moved to San Francisco, Muybridge followed.[1] He opened his own bookstore in 1855, ran it with distinction and success, and soon became famous as a collector of photographic engravings. In 1860, having sold his business to his younger brother Thomas, Muybridge planned to travel across the United States to New York, and then to London. While traveling through Texas, his stagecoach was involved in a high-speed collision with a tree, which left Muybridge with a scar on his head, as well as confusion, double vision, and no sense of smell or taste. These symptoms lasted for three months, and Muybridge suffered headaches and episodes of double vision throughout the rest of his life.[2] At some point during his recovery back in London, he resumed and expanded his interest in photography. By the late 1860s, he had returned to San Francisco, this time as a professional photographer. By the end of the 1860s, he had become an acclaimed landscape and nature photographer. Muybridge's reputation as a photographer ultimate connected him with **Leland Stanford**, who invited Muybridge to photograph the former governor's new mansion in 1872.

It was due to Muybridge's work photographing Stanford's mansion (and his carriage horses) that Stanford hit upon the idea of having the photographer take pictures of one of his race horses in motion. Stanford had become interested in scientific methods for training racehorses, and wanted to solve the argument over unsupported transit to further his own knowledge and satisfy his curiosity. While it is true that Stanford had some arguments about the theory of unsupported transit with other prominent members of society, the story involving a $25,000 bet is "likely to be a myth circulated in the popular press."[3] Muybridge worked on the project of photographing the moving horse in 1872 and 1873, and he allegedly produced a single photograph showing a horse in full gallop will all four hooves off the ground. However, there was only one eyewitness to the event, and the negative of the picture has been lost. For the next four or five years, Muybridge traveled all over, creating still photographs.

During that time, he discovered that his wife had conceived a child with another man. Muybridge shot the baby's father, killing the man, and was jailed for four months before a jury acquitted him on the contention that the murder had been justified.

Finally, in 1877, Muybridge returned to the horse project, taking a series of pictures that showed every stage of a horse's gallop. There were complaints in the popular press that the photographs had been retouched—a common practice at the time—so Stanford and Muy-bridge conceived a new plan. In 1878, they invited the press to witness a new series of horse pictures in person. Muybridge had developed new cameras with faster shutter speeds and electronic triggering devices to make it easier to capture the horse in motion. The assembled journalists were able to watch the horse gallop in person along a track specially equipped with cameras and a white background. Then Muybridge had them watch him develop the pictures in real time. The event captured the imagination of the reporters, and they heaped public praise on Muybridge's accomplishment. What Muybridge accomplished was more than resolving a mythical bet. He established that cameras could be used to resolve scientific questions, and his photographic series of motion provided evidence that the public was interested in seeing how things moved.

You should know by now, however, that the history of any mass medium cannot be reduced to the work of a single person, and that is certainly true of Muybridge. While he was touring Europe, riding on the crest of the popularity of his photographic work, French scientist **Etienne-Jules Marey** had developed a camera that layered multiple images of a moving subject onto a single print. The resulting photograph showed every stage of a subject's movement all at once, from left to right, showing the entire range of motion in one still photograph. This technology was "totally without precedent," and allowed Marey to create images that dissected motion with scientific precision.[4] Marey's work, along with Muybridge's, helped set the stage for the development of motion picture technology and the popularization of film as a medium. But as the rest of this chapter explains, their work primarily "inspired inventors around the world to try their hand at constructing devices capable of producing the illusion of motion photography."[5] It was really William Dickson of Edison Labs who took that inspiration and developed practical film technology. And, of course, there were many others who helped create the technology we think of as film.

Focus on Critical Thinking: Motion Picture Technology as an Obstacle to Visual Equity

The camera never lies. That's what we have been told, over and over throughout our lives. In many ways, our culture is more governed by this saying than ever before. We rely on pictures and video footage of more and more aspects of our lives to show us what "really" happened during different events. The irony, of course, is that cameras are fully capable of lying. The ideas that cameras don't lie can be traced all the way back to 1859[6], soon after cameras became widely available to the general public. It's important to understand, however, that cameras were seen as cutting edge technology during this period, and were widely regarded with suspicion—not unlike every new development in media technology. The phrase "the camera never lies" is often attributed to the famous movie actor **Cesar Romero**, and while he might have popularized it, he also said the camera "lies every day."[7] At the most basic level, cameras lie by focusing our attention on one thing and redirecting our attention away from something else. *Look over here*, the camera says, *and not over there*. But the development of motion picture technology resulted in a different kind of deceptive practice that persists to this day.

As the previous section of this introduction explains, film technology was introduced to the public as a scientific tool. Muybridge and Mayer popularized the notion that film was useful for studying the movement of people (and animals), and in America in particular this belief was so powerful that our film industry was initially limited to the production of incredibly short films that the general public regarded as little more than scientific curiosities. It took French entrepreneurs to demonstrate that movies could be used to tell stories. But even after the American film industry adopted narrative film-making, the idea persisted that this new film technology was a way to capture reality with precision and objectivity. The problem with this idea is that film technology is not some sort of natural occurrence. It is a continually evolving series of technologies that are intentionally and carefully developed by people. Film does not and cannot simply "show us reality" because there is no single, objective way to determine what the world looks like, and because no camera actually works like the human eye. As people invent new film technologies, they must choose which techniques to use and how to use them. And each of those choices has an impact on world that motion pictures show us.

The popularity of smartphones with cameras has given all of us experiences that in the past were reserved exclusively for professional photographers. We're able to take countless pictures of ourselves, other people, and the world, without worrying about the expense of film and development. Furthermore, we have access to editing tools so advanced that even the most skilled photographers and photo scientists of the past could barely have imagined them. And so nearly all of us have had a moment where we took a picture of something— usually ourselves, if we're being honest—and then realized that something was wrong with the picture. For some reason, the selfie we took just doesn't look like us. There's something wrong with the lighting, the color. . . *something*. So we click the "edit" button and we start applying filters, changing image settings, and so on, until the picture looks more like we do. Sometimes the resulting picture actually looks better than we do. In fact, there are multiple photo editing "filters" available on various apps that are designed to make us look better than we do in real life, and many of us have spent more time than we'd like to admit trying to figure out which one of those filters makes us look the best.

The process I have just described, which might sound somewhat shallow and maybe a little silly, very closely mirrors what happened during the development of modern film and video technology. First in black and white and then in color, scientists invented and then refined various methods for creating images that depicted humans in ways that seemed realistic. This was an incredibly difficult process, and it required a lot of work capturing and controlling light. French theater owners had been using artificial lighting to make their actors easier to see (and more attractive) since the 1780s[8], but motion picture photography presented much greater technical challenges. Some of the most difficult work involved creating realistic-seeming images and video of the human face. After all, photographic technology "has generally taken the human face as its touchstone."[9] And during this period, the "human face" scientists had in mind was invariably a white face. In fact, throughout nearly the entire history of film technology, white faces have been the norm for innovation and design. A great deal of research and innovation went into producing faces that looked "white enough" on film, and early movie actors had to wear thick layers of noxious makeup in order to seem "properly" white on camera.[10] When color film technology became possible, each stage of the innovation process "was guided by how it rendered white flesh tones."[11] But as they worked on color film, scientists had that same moment of realization most of us have had when we edit selfies: they could find ways to make actors look even better on screen than they did in person.

If it's possible to make actors look better on film than in real life, what exactly makes an image "better"? As noted filmmaker and professor Brian Winston has thoroughly documented, film technology manipulation allows scientists to "accommodate the cultural prejudices of the users—to make, by careful chemistry, already pleasing (Caucasian) flesh tones more pleasing than they are in nature."[12] Early color film scientists at Kodak took the idea of accommodating the cultural prejudices of their audiences seriously, recruiting judges to compare different images and determine which ones were the most pleasing.[13] Film labs like Kodak realized that they could advertise their products as superior to the real world. "Exact reproduction, a supposed goal of the photographic and cinematographic project, [took] second place to inexact, culturally determined 'optimum' reproduction. Caucasian skin tones are not to be rendered as they are, but rather as they are preferred —a whiter shade of white."[14] Ultimately, color film was developed not just to represent people as they are, but to show audiences a culturally idealized understanding of what white people ought to look like.

This development had profound impacts on the motion picture industry. First, movies offered their audiences an idealized (and culturally biased) understanding of what white skin looks like. Rather than accurately reflecting the vast variation in skin tone among white actors, movies showed us skin that was almost uniformly pale, possessing both a whiteness and an evenness not found in nature. Furthermore, when you develop technology that is specifically normed around and constructed to feature white skin, "the results do not produce a film stock that can be readily manipulated to give good black skin tones."[15] From the moment that Black actors were featured on screen, filmmakers have recognized that their technology does a poor job of representing them. In fact, even now "photographing non-white people is typically constructed as a problem"[16] and black actors have often been described as overly demanding when they advocate for changes in the way they are lit and filmed. This not only discourages filmmakers from casting Black actors, it also creates visual differences between the way white and Black actors are portrayed. In many films, when a white actor is on screen with a Black actor, the lighting is set up for the white actor, leaving the Black actor in shadow. This not only makes the Black actor harder to see, it also plays into commonly understood film symbolism where white is seen as virtuous and dark is seen as sinister. We have only recently begun to see filmmakers address this situation, using modern technology to light and film Black actors in pleasing ways.

This same dynamic works to disadvantage other groups as well. Latin actors are often either filmed as though they are white or lit in such a way to make their skin seem darker than it is. Cinematographer Yu-Lun Sung notes that "[t]here are no established aesthetic guidelines" for lighting Asian actors in film, and that research on filming Asian skin is almost nonexistent.[17] Furthermore, existing film technology and cinematographic practice do not recognize that skin tones vary dramatically between different groups of Asian, Latin, and Black actors. This represents a real challenge for filmmakers who care not only about equity, but about telling stories that reflect and honor the diverse reality of their subjects. As Brian Winston wrote nearly forty years ago, "the apparatus [of film and television] is not neutral, and altering its purpose" requires a great deal of work.[18] Being media literate means, in part, being aware of the history and tendencies of the photographic medium. Watching film and television with a critical eye toward the way different actors are visually presented can help us understand and evaluate the messages those mediums are sending us, both consciously and as a result of their technological structure.

What to Study

KEY WORDS

Zoopraxiscope

Persistence of vision

Kinetograph

Daguerreotype

Calotype

Kinetoscope

Cinematographe

The Great Train Robbery

Nickelodeons

Motion Picture Patents Company (The Trust)

Movie palaces

The Motion Picture Production Code

The Paramount Decision

Blockbuster mentality

Product placement

IMPORTANT PEOPLE

Eadweard Muybridge

Leland Stanford

Etienne-Jules Marey

Cesar Romero

August and Louis Lumiere

Thomas Edison

William Dickson

Hannibal Goodwin

George Eastman

Joseph Nicephore Niepce

Louis Daguerre

William Henry Fox Talbot

Georges Melies

Edwin S. Porter

Emmett J. Scott

QUESTIONS YOU SHOULD BE ABLE TO ANSWER

- Who was Eadweard Muybridge and what accomplishment is he best known for? When did he actually do this? What was his relationship to Leland Stanford, and what was going on with that horse?
- Who was Etienne-Jules Marey? What film-related achievement is he best known for? How did his work and that of Muybridge impact the medium of film?
- When and by whom was artificial lighting first used on actors?
- What has photographic technology generally taken as its touch-stone? How did that impact innovations in color film technology? What was the result in terms of how white people were represented on film?
- What two impacts have the technological privileging of white skin had on the film industry? How do these impacts disadvantage non-white actors?
- How did the idea of accommodating the prejudices of the audience impact the development of color film technology?
- Who developed the MPPC? What impact did it have on the film industry?
- Why did so many early film companies move to California? How many movie theaters were there in the US by the mid-1920s?
- What impact did the arrival of narrative film-making have on the industry? What about sound in film?
- Why were movies so popular among new city dwellers in the U.S. at the beginning of the 20th century? What impact did WWI have on the foreign distribution of American movies?
- What was the first sound film, and why is that a complicated question? What three impacts did sound have on the film industry?
- How was the film industry able to survive the Great Depression?
- What impact did the arrival of television have on the film industry?
- What were the main reasons that the popularity of movies declined in the late 1940s and the 1950s? What year were the most movie tickets sold in the U.S.? How does that compare to now? What

percentage of Americans currently go to the movies one time or less per year?

- What are the three component systems of the movie industry?
- About how many feature films are produced annually in the U.S.? How does that number compare to the 1980s? How many movie screens are there in the country?
- What are the three largest movie theater chains, and roughly what percentage of all domestic tickets do they sell? What percentage of a theater's profits usually come from concessions?
- What percentage of an average movie's ticket sales come from outside the U.S.?
- What percentage of film revenues comes from ticket sales?

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Film

10



Ma Rainey's Black Bottom was nominated for multiple Academy Awards in 2021. Amid the blockbusters, Hollywood can still produce mature, serious, and entertaining movies.

DAVID LEE/NETFLIX/APL Archive/ Alamy Stock Photo

1720s Early efforts using chemical salts to capture temporary photographic images

1793 ▶ Niépce begins experimenting with methods to set optical images

1816 Niépce develops photography

1839 ▶ Daguerreotype introduced; Talbot's calotype (paper film)

1800

1877 ▶ Muybridge takes race photos

1887 Goodwin's celluloid roll film

1888 Dickson produces kinetograph

1889 Eastman's easy-to-use camera

1891 Edison's kinetoscope

1895 Lumière brothers debut cinématographe

1896 Edison unveils Edison Vitascope

1850



Pixtal/age fotostock



George Eastman House/Getty Images

1902 Méliès's *A Trip to the Moon*

1903 Porter's *The Great Train Robbery* (montage)

1908 Motion Picture Patents Company founded

1915 Lincoln Motion Picture Company; Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*

1922 Hays office opens

1926 Sound comes to film

1934 Motion Picture Production Code issued

1939 Television unveiled at World's Fair

1947 HUAC convenes

1948 Paramount Decision; Cable TV introduced

1900



Library of Congress, [LC-USZ62-45683]

1969 ▶ Indie film *Easy Rider*

1976 VCR introduced

1996 ▶ DVD introduced

1950



Courtesy of Everett Collection

2007 *Purple Violets* released directly to iTunes

2009 *Avatar*

2012 For first time, more money spent on online movies than on DVD

2014 Toy manufacturer Hasbro opens Allspark studios; major studios commit to all-digital movie distribution

2015 Netflix and Amazon begin production of feature films

2016 Mobile is top platform for watching Internet video

2017 Apple begins feature film production; *Manchester by the Sea* from Amazon is first movie from a streaming service nominated for an Academy Award

2018 *Unsane* shot entirely on iPhone; Mattel Films founded

2020 Coronavirus in the US; in-theater exhibition comes to a complete halt; Universal announces direct-to-viewer distribution; Paramount Decision reversed; Netflix buys Los Angeles theater

2021 Warner Bros. releases all new films day-and-date; Amazon buys MGM

2000



Howard Kingsnorth/Photodisc/ Getty Images

PARIS IS COLD AND DAMP ON THIS DECEMBER NIGHT, THREE DAYS AFTER CHRISTMAS IN 1895.

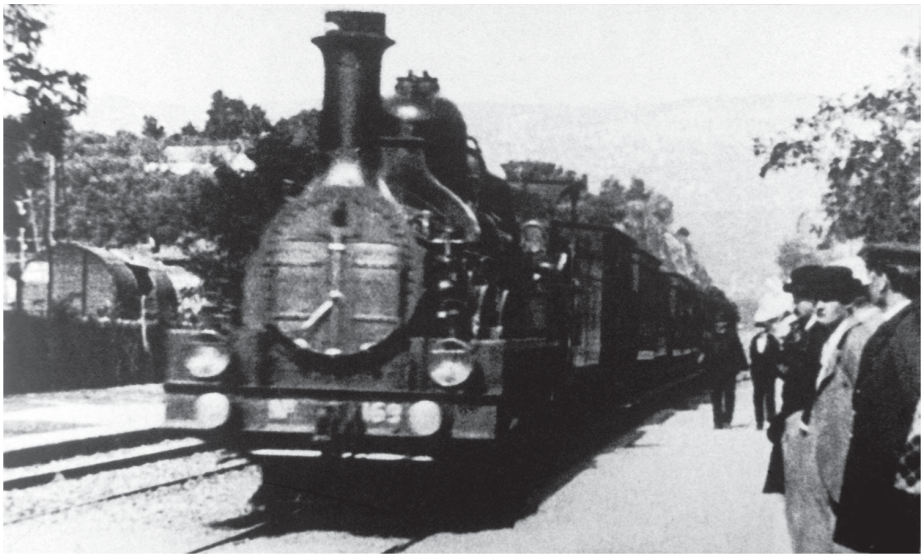
But you bundle up and make your way to the Grand Café in the heart of the city. You've heard that brothers Auguste and Louis Lumière will be displaying their new invention that somehow makes pictures move. Your curiosity is piqued.

Tables and chairs are set up in a basement room of the café, and a white bedsheet is draped above its stage. The Lumières appear to polite applause. They announce the program: *La Sortie des usines Lumière (Quitting Time at the Lumière Factory)*; *Le Repas de bébé*, featuring a Lumière child eating; *L'Arroseur arrosé,* about a practical-joking boy and his victim, the gardener; and finally *L'Arrivée d'un train en gare*, the arrival of a train at a station.

The lights go out. Somewhere behind you, someone starts the machine. There is some brief flickering on the suspended sheet and then . . . you are completely awestruck. There before you—bigger than life-size—photographs are really moving. You see places you know to be miles away. You spy on the secret world of a prankster boy, remembering your own childhood. But the last film is the most impressive. As the giant locomotive chugs toward the audience, you and most of those around you are convinced you are about to be crushed. There is panic. People are ducking under their chairs, screaming. Death is imminent!

The first paying audience in the history of motion pictures has just had a lesson in movie watching.

The Lumière brothers were excellent mechanics, and their father owned a factory that made photographic plates. Their first films were little more than what we would now consider black-and-white home movies. As you can tell from their titles, they were simple stories. There was no editing; the camera was simply turned on, then turned off. There were no fades, wipes, or flashbacks, no computer graphics, no dialogue, and no music; yet much of the audience was terrified by the oncoming cinematic locomotive. And while this story may be the stuff of legends—film historians disagree—it has been around a long time because it reminds us that not only were the first audiences illiterate in the language of film, but also just how far we've come since the medium's earliest days.



The Lumières' *L'Arrivée d'un train en gare*. As simple as early films were, their viewers did not have sufficient film literacy to properly interpret, understand, and enjoy them. This scene supposedly sent people screaming and hiding to avoid being crushed by the oncoming train.

Collection Christophel/Alamy Stock Photo

We begin our study of the medium that Louis Lumière himself predicted would be "an invention without a future" (in Dargis & Scott, 2019, p. AR59), from its entrepreneurial beginnings, through the introduction of its narrative and visual language, to its establishment as a large, studio-run industry. We detail Hollywood's relationship with its early audiences and changes in the structure and content of films resulting from the introduction of television. We then look at contemporary movie production, distribution, and exhibition systems and how convergence is altering all three; the influence of the major studios; and the economic pressures on them in an increasingly multimedia environment. We examine the special place movies hold for us and how young audiences and the films that target them may affect our culture. Recognizing the use of product placement in movies is the basis for improving our media literacy skill.

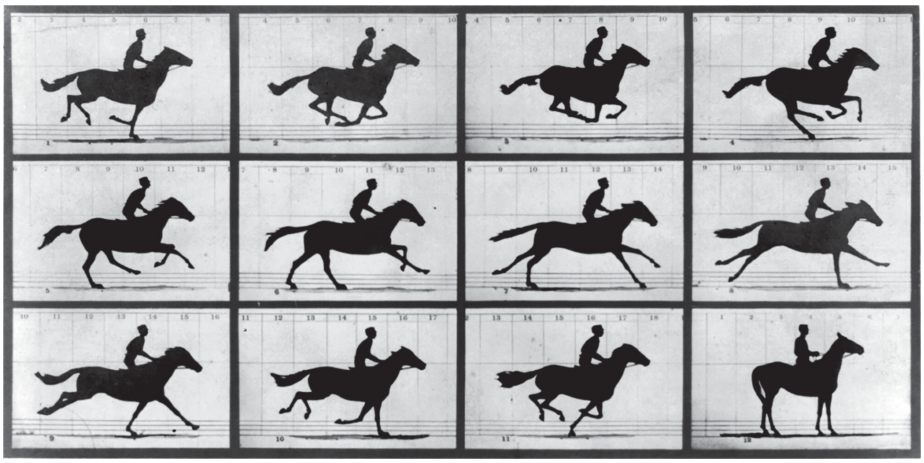
A Short History of the Movies

We are no longer illiterate in the grammar of film, nor are movies as simple as the early Lumière offerings. Consider the sophistication necessary for filmmakers to produce a magical horror movie such as *Gretel & Hansel* (2020) and the skill required for audiences to read the unannounced jumbled time frames and fantasy sequences of *Rocket Man* (2019). How we arrived at this contemporary medium–audience relationship is a wonderful story.

Early newspapers were developed by businesspeople and patriots for a small, politically involved elite that could read, but the early movie industry was built largely by entrepreneurs who wanted to make money entertaining everyone. Unlike television, whose birth and growth were predetermined and guided by the already well-established radio industry, there were no precedents, no rules, and no expectations for movies.

Return to the opening vignette. The audience for the first Lumière movies did not "speak film." Think of it as being stranded in a foreign country with no knowledge of the language and cultural conventions. You would have to make your way, with each new experience helping you better understand the next. First, you'd learn some simple words and basic customs. Eventually, you'd be able to better understand the language and people. In other words, you'd become increasingly literate in that culture. Beginning with that Paris premiere, people had to become film literate. They had to develop an understanding of cinematic alterations in time and place. They had to learn how images and sound combined to create meaning. But unlike visiting another culture, there was no existing cinematic culture. Movie creators and their audiences had to develop and understand the culture together.

The Early Entrepreneurs



◂ Muybridge's horse pictures. When these plates were placed sequentially and rotated, they produced the appearance of motion.

Library of Congress, [LC-USZ62-45683]

In 1873, former California governor Leland Stanford needed help winning a bet he had made with a friend. Convinced that a horse in full gallop had all four feet off the ground, he had to prove it. He

turned to well-known photographer Eadweard Muybridge, who worked on the problem for 4 years before finding a solution. In 1877, Muybridge arranged a series of still cameras along a stretch of racetrack. As the horse sprinted by, each camera took its picture. The resulting photographs won Stanford his bet, but more importantly, they sparked an idea in their photographer. Muybridge was intrigued by the appearance of motion created when photos are viewed sequentially. He began taking pictures of numerous kinds of human and animal action. To display his work, Muybridge invented the **zoopraxiscope**, a machine for projecting slides onto a distant surface.

When people watched the rapidly projected sequential slides, they saw the pictures as if they were in motion. This perception is the result of a physiological phenomenon known as **persistence of vision**, in which the images our eyes gather are retained in the brain for about 1/24 of a second. Therefore, if photographic frames are moved at 24 frames a second, people perceive them as actually in motion absent any flicker or other interruption.

Muybridge eventually met the prolific inventor Thomas Edison in 1888. Edison quickly saw the scientific and economic potential of the zoopraxiscope and set his top scientist, William Dickson, to the task of developing a better projector. But Dickson correctly saw the need to develop a better system of *filming.* Dickson combined Hannibal Goodwin's newly invented celluloid roll film with George Eastman's easy-to-use Kodak camera to make a motion picture camera that took 40 photographs a second. He used his **kinetograph** to film all types of theatrical performances, some by unknowns and others by famous entertainers such as Annie Oakley and Buffalo Bill Cody. Of course, none of this would have been possible had it not been for photography itself.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF PHOTOGRAPHY

The process of photography was first developed by French inventor Joseph Nicéphore Niépce around 1816. Although there had been much experimentation in the realm of image making at the time, Niépce was the first person to make practical use of a camera and film, but his color photographs of natural objects would last only a short time.

Niépce's success, however, attracted the attention of countryman Louis Daguerre, who joined with him to perfect the process. Niépce died before the 1839 introduction of the **daguerreotype**, a process of recording images on polished metal plates, usually copper, covered with a thin layer of silver iodide emulsion. When light reflected from an object passed through a lens and struck the emulsion, the emulsion would etch the image on the plate. The plate was then washed with a cleaning solvent, leaving a positive or replica image.

In the same year as the first public display of the daguerreotype, British inventor William Henry Fox Talbot introduced a paper film process. This process was more important to the development of photography than the metal film system, but the daguerreotype received widespread attention and acclaim and made the public enthusiastic about photography.

The **calotype** (Talbot's system) used translucent paper, what we now call the negative, from which several prints could be made. In addition, his film was much more sensitive than Daguerre's metal plate, allowing for exposure times of only a few seconds as opposed to the daguerreotype's 30 minutes. Until calotype, virtually all daguerreotype images were still lives and portraits, a necessity with long exposure times.

The final steps in the development of the photographic process necessary for true motion pictures were taken, as we've just seen, by Goodwin in 1887 and Eastman in 1889 and were adapted to motion pictures by Edison scientist Dickson.

THOMAS EDISON

Edison built the first motion picture studio near his laboratory in New Jersey. He called it Black Maria, the common name at that time for a police paddy wagon. It had an open roof and revolved to follow the sun so the performers being filmed would always be illuminated.

The completed films were not projected. Instead, they were run through a **kinetoscope**, a sort of peep show device. Often they were accompanied by music provided by another Edison invention, the phonograph. Patented in 1891 and commercially available 3 years later, the kinetoscope quickly became a popular feature in penny arcades, vaudeville halls, and big-city Kinetoscope parlors. This marked the beginning of commercial motion picture exhibition.



▼ Typical of daguerreotypes, this plate captures a portrait. The method's long exposure time made all but the most stationary subjects impossible to photograph.

George Eastman House/Getty Images

THE LUMIÈRE BROTHERS

The Lumière brothers made the next advance. Their initial screenings demonstrated that people would sit in a darkened room to watch motion pictures projected on a screen. The brothers from Lyon envisioned great wealth in their ability to increase the number of people who could simultaneously watch a movie. In 1895, they patented their **cinématographe**, a device that both photographed and projected action. Within weeks of their Christmastime showing, long lines of enthusiastic moviegoers were waiting for their makeshift theater to open. Edison recognized the advantage of the cinématographe over his kinetoscope, so he acquired the patent for an advanced projector developed

by US inventor Thomas Armat. On April 23, 1896, the Edison Vitascope premiered in New York City, and the American movie business was born.

The Coming of Narrative

The Edison and Lumière movies were typically only a few minutes long and showed little more than filmed reproductions of reality—celebrities, weight lifters, jugglers, and babies. They were shot in fixed frame (the camera did not move), and there was no editing. For the earliest audiences, this was enough. But soon the novelty wore thin. People wanted more for their money. French filmmaker Georges Méliès, a magician and caricaturist before he became a filmmaker, began making narrative motion pictures, that is, movies that told a story. At the end of the 1890s, he was shooting and exhibiting one-scene, one-shot movies, but soon he began making stories based on sequential shots in different places. He simply took one shot, stopped the camera, moved it, took another shot, and so on. Méliès is often called the "first artist of the cinema" because he brought narrative to the medium in the form of imaginative tales such as *A Trip to the Moon* (1902). This fantastic tale came to America in 1903, and US moviemakers were quick not only to borrow the idea of using film to tell stories but also to improve on it.



◂ Scene from *A Trip to the Moon.* Narrative came to the movies through the inventive imagination of Georges Méliès.

Star Film/Edison Manufacturing Company/Photofest

Edwin S. Porter, an Edison Company camera operator, saw that film could be an even better storyteller with more artistic use of camera placement and editing. His 12-minute *The Great Train Robbery* (1903) was the first movie to use editing, intercutting of scenes, and a mobile camera to tell a relatively sophisticated tale. It was also the first Western. This new narrative form using **montage**—tying together

two separate but related shots in such a way that they take on a new, unified meaning—was an instant hit with audiences.

Almost immediately hundreds of **nickelodeons**, some having as many as 100 seats, were opened in converted stores, banks, and halls across the United States. The price of admission was one nickel, hence the name. By 1905 cities such as New York were opening a new nickelodeon every day. From 1907 to 1908, the first year in which there were more narrative than documentary films, the number of nickelodeons in the United States increased tenfold. With so many exhibition halls in so many towns serving such an extremely enthusiastic public, many movies were needed. To create more films, hundreds of new **factory studios**, or production companies, were started.

Because so many movies needed to be made and rushed to the nickelodeons, people working in the industry had to learn and perform virtually all aspects of production. There was precious little time for, or profitability in, the kind of specialization that marks contemporary filmmaking. Writer, actor, and camera operator D. W. Griffith perfected his craft in this environment. He was quickly recognized as a brilliant director. He introduced innovations such as scheduled rehearsals before final shooting and production based on close adherence to a shooting script. He lavished attention on otherwise ignored aspects of a film's look—costume and lighting—and used close-ups and other dramatic camera angles to transmit emotion.

All his skill came together in 1915 with the release of *The Birth of a Nation.* Whereas Porter had used montage to tell a story, Griffith used it to create passion, move emotions, and heighten suspense. The most influential silent film ever made, this 3-hour epic was 6 weeks in rehearsal and 9 weeks in shooting, cost $125,000 to produce (making it the most expensive movie made to that date), was distributed to theaters complete with an orchestral music score, had a cast of thousands of humans and animals, and had an admission price well above the usual 5 cents—$3. It was the most popular and profitable movie made and remained so until 1939, when it was surpassed by *Gone with the Wind.*



▸ Scene from *The Great Train Robbery.* Porter's masterpiece introduced audiences to editing, intercutting of scenes, moving cameras, and the Western.

Edison/Kobal/Shutterstock

With other Griffith masterpieces, *Intolerance* (1916) and *Broken Blossoms* (1919), *The Birth of a Nation* set new standards for the American film. They took movies out of the nickelodeons and made them big business. At the same time, however, *The Birth of a Nation* represented the basest aspects of US culture because it included an ugly, racist portrayal of African Americans and a sympathetic treatment of the Ku Klux Klan. The film inspired protests in front of theaters across the country and criticism in some newspapers and magazines, and it led African Americans to fight back with their own films (see the essay "African American Response to D. W. Griffith: The Lincoln and Micheaux Film Companies"). Nevertheless, *The Birth of a Nation* found acceptance by the vast majority of people.



The Ku Klux Klan was the collective hero in D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation.* This cinematic masterpiece and groundbreaking film employed production techniques never before used; however, its racist theme mars its legacy.

Courtesy of Everett Collection

The Big Studios

In 1908, Thomas Edison, foreseeing the huge amounts of money that could be made from movies, founded the Motion Picture Patents Company (MPPC), often simply called the Trust. This group of 10 companies under Edison's control, holding the patents to virtually all existing filmmaking and exhibition equipment, ran the production and distribution of film in the United States with an iron fist. Anyone who wanted to make or exhibit a movie needed Trust permission, typically not forthcoming. In addition, the MPPC had rules about the look of the movies it would permit: They must be one reel, approximately 12 minutes long, and must adopt a "stage perspective"; that is, the actors must fill the frame as if they were in a stage play.

Many independent film companies sprang up in defiance of the Trust, including Griffith's in 1913. To avoid MPPC scrutiny and reprisal, these companies moved as far away as they could, to California. This westward migration had other benefits. Better weather meant longer shooting seasons. Free of MPPC interference, people like Griffith who wanted to explore the potential of films longer than 12 minutes and with imaginative use of the camera were free to do so.

Another benefit of this new freedom were opportunities for women filmmakers. "The industry—new, ad hoc, making up its own rules as it went along—had not yet locked in a strict division of labor by gender," writes film essayist Margaret Talbot. "Women came to Los Angeles from all over the country, impelled not so much by dreams of stardom as by the prospect of interesting work in a freewheeling enterprise that valued them. 'Of all the different industries that have offered opportunities to women,' the screenwriter Clara Beranger told an interviewer in 1919, 'none have given them the chance that motion pictures have.'" Women played "an outsized role in the origins of moviemaking," but as movie making became bigger and consolidated around a few giant studios, opportunities for newcomers and outsiders, especially women, rapidly diminished (2019, p. 69).

The new studio system, with its more elaborate films and big-name stars, controlled the movie industry from California. Thomas H. Ince (maker of the William S. Hart Westerns), Griffith, and comedy genius Mack Sennett formed the Triangle Company. Adolph Zukor's Famous Players in Famous Plays —formed when Zukor was denied MPPC permission to distribute one of his films—joined with several other independents and a distribution company to become Paramount. Other independents joined to create the Fox Film Company (soon called 20th Century Fox) and Universal. Although films were still silent, by the mid-1920s, there were more than 20,000 movie theaters in the United States—many of them **movie palaces**, elaborately decorated, opulent, architecturally stunning theaters—and more than 350,000 people were making their living in film production. More than 1,240,000 feet of film were shot each year in Hollywood, and annual domestic US box office receipts exceeded $750 million.



USING MEDIA TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

African American Response to D. W. Griffith: The Lincoln and Micheaux Film Companies

The African American community did not sit passively in the wake of D. W. Griffith's 1915 cinematic but hateful wonder, *The Birth of a Nation.* (It's original subtitle was "The former enemies of North and South are united again in common defense of their Aryan birthright.") The NAACP fought the film in court and on the picket line, largely unsuccessfully. But other African Americans decided to use film to combat *Birth.* The first was Emmett J. Scott, a quiet, scholarly man. He sought money from the country's Black middle class to produce a short film showing the achievements of African Americans. His intention was to attach his film, *Lincoln's Dream*, as a prologue to screenings of the Griffith film. Together with screenwriter Elaine Sterne, Scott eventually

expanded the project into a feature-length movie. He approached Universal Studios with his film but was rejected.

With independent backing from both Black and white investors, the film was released in 1918. Produced by an inexperienced cast and crew working on a production beset by bad weather and technical difficulties, the retitled *The Birth of a Race* filled 12 reels of film and ran more than three hours. Its publicity hailed it as "The Greatest and Most Daring of Photoplays . . . The Story of Sin . . . A Master Picture Conceived in the Spirit of Truth and Dedicated to All the Races of the World" (**Bogle, 1989**, p. 103). It was an artistic and commercial failure. Scott, however, had inspired others.

Even before *The Birth of a Race* was completed, the Lincoln Motion Picture Company was incorporated, in Nebraska in 1916 and in California in 1917, by brothers Noble and George Johnson. Their tack differed from Scott's. They understood that their "black" films would never be allowed on "white" screens, so they produced movies designed to tell Black-oriented stories to Black audiences. They might not be able to convince white America of Griffith's error, but they could reassure African Americans that their views could find expression. Lincoln's first movie was *The Realization of a Negro's Ambition,* and it told the story of Black American achievements. The Johnson brothers turned US racism to their advantage. Legal segregation in the South and de facto segregation in the North had led to an explosion of Black theaters. These movie houses needed content. Lincoln helped provide it by producing 10 three-reelers between 1916 and 1920.

Another notable film company soon began operation, hoping to challenge, at least in Black theaters, Griffith's portrayals. Oscar Micheaux founded the Micheaux Film and Book Company in 1918 in Chicago and soon produced *The Homesteader*, an eight-reel film based on the autobiographical novel he'd written three years earlier. It was the story of a successful Black homestead rancher in South Dakota. But Micheaux was not content to boost Black self-esteem. Producing the first feature film and the first all-sound movie to employ Black talent in front of and behind the camera (**Gray, 2020**), he was determined to make "racial photoplays depicting racial life" (as quoted in **Sampson, 1977**, p. 42). In 1920, he released *Within Our Gates*, a drama about the southern lynching of a Black man. Censored and denied a screening in dozens of cities both North and South, Micheaux was undeterred, even taking on interracial marriage in his 1923 *The House Behind the Cedars*.

These early film pioneers used their medium to make a difference. They challenged the interpretation of history being circulated by the most popular movie in the world, and they provided encouragement and entertainment to the African American community.

The industry prospered not just because of its artistry, drive, and innovation but because it used these to meet the needs of a growing audience. At the beginning of the 20th century, generous immigration rules, combined with political and social unrest abroad, encouraged a flood of European immigrants who congregated in US cities where the jobs were and where people like themselves who spoke their language lived. American farmers, largely illiterate, also swarmed to the cities as years of drought and farm failure left them without home or hope. Jobs in the big mills and factories, although unpleasant,

were plentiful. These new city dwellers had money and the need for leisure activities. Movies were a nickel, required no ability to read or to understand English, and offered glamorous stars and wonderful stories from faraway places.

Foreign political unrest proved to be a boon to the infant US movie business in another way as well. In 1914 and 1915, when the California studios were remaking the industry in their own grand image, war raged in Europe. European moviemaking, most significantly the influential French, German, and Russian cinema, came to a halt. European demand for movies, however, did not. American movies, produced in huge numbers for the hungry home audience, were ideal for overseas distribution. Because so few in the domestic audience could read English, few printed titles were used in the then-silent movies. Therefore, little had to be changed to satisfy foreign moviegoers. Film was indeed a universal language, but more important, the American film industry had firmly established itself as the world leader, all within 20 years of the Lumière's brothers' first screening.



Women were at the center of the emerging movie industry. Marion Fairfax, in addition to writing numerous successful silent film scripts, founded her own production company.

Historic Collection/Alamy Stock Photo

Change Comes to Hollywood

As was the case with newspapers and magazines, the advent of television significantly altered the movie–audience relationship. But the nature of that relationship had already been shaped and reshaped in the three decades between the coming of sound to film and the coming of television.

THE TALKIES

The first sound film was one of three films produced by Warner Bros. It may have been *Don Juan* (1926), starring John Barrymore, distributed with synchronized music and sound effects. Or perhaps it was Warner's more famous *The Jazz Singer* (1927), starring Al Jolson, which had several sound and speaking scenes (354 words in all) but was largely silent. Or it may have been the 1928 all-sound *Lights of New York.* Historians disagree because they cannot decide what constitutes a sound film.

There is no confusion, however, about the impact of sound on the movies and their audiences. First, sound made possible new genres—musicals, for example. Second, as actors now had to really act, performance aesthetics improved. Third, sound made film production a much more complicated and expensive proposition. As a result, many smaller filmmakers closed shop, solidifying the hold of the big studios over the industry. In 1933, 60% of all US films came from Hollywood's eight largest studios. By 1940, they were producing 76% of all US movies and collecting 86% of the total box office. As for the audience, in 1926, the year of *Don Juan*'s release, 50 million people went to the movies each week. In 1929, at the onset of the Great Depression, the number had risen to 80 million. By 1930, when sound was firmly entrenched, the number of weekly moviegoers had risen to 90 million (**Mast & Kawin, 1996**).

SCANDAL

The popularity of talkies, and of movies in general, inevitably raised questions about their impact on the culture. In 1896, well before sound, *The Kiss* had generated a great moral outcry. Its stars, John C. Rice and May Irwin, were also the leads in the popular Broadway play *The Widow Jones*, which closed with a climactic kiss. The Edison Company asked Rice and Irwin to re-create the kiss for the big screen. Newspapers and politicians were bombarded with complaints from the offended. Kissing in the theater (for sophisticated elites) was one thing; in movies (for everyday people) it was quite another! The then-newborn industry responded to this and other calls for censorship with various forms of self-regulation and internal codes. But in the early 1920s, more Hollywood scandals forced a more direct response.

In 1920, "America's Sweetheart" Mary Pickford obtained a questionable Nevada divorce from her husband and immediately married the movies' other darling, Douglas Fairbanks, himself newly divorced. In 1920 and 1921, comedian Fatty Arbuckle was involved in legal problems with the police on two coasts. The first was apparently hushed up after a $100,000 gift was made to a Massachusetts district attorney, but the second involved a charge of manslaughter at a San Francisco hotel party thrown by the actor. Although he was acquitted in his third trial (the first two ended in hung juries) and the cause of the woman's death was never fully determined, the stain on Arbuckle and the industry remained. The cry for government intervention was raised. State legislatures introduced more than 100 separate pieces of legislation to censor or otherwise control movies and their content.

Hollywood responded in 1922 by creating the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA) and appointing Will H. Hays—chair of the Republican Party, a Presbyterian church elder, and a former postmaster general—president. The Hays Office, as it became known, undertook a vast effort to improve the image of the movies. Stressing the importance of movies to national life and

as an educational medium, Hays promised better movies and founded a committee on public relations that included many civic and religious leaders. Eventually, in 1934, the Motion Picture Production Code (MPPC) was released. The code forbade the use of profanity, limited bedroom scenes to married couples (although they could not be shown in bed together), required that skimpy outfits be replaced by more complete costumes, delineated the length of screen kisses, ruled out scenes that ridiculed public officials or religious leaders, and outlawed a series of words from "God" to "nuts," all enforced by a $25,000 fine and the demand that scripts be submitted in advance for approval, a form of pre-censorship (**Denby, 2016**).

NEW GENRES, NEW PROBLEMS

By 1932, weekly movie attendance had dropped to 60 million. The Great Depression was having its effect. Yet the industry was able to weather the crisis for two reasons. The first was its creativity. New genres held people's interest. Feature documentaries such as *The Plow That Broke the Plains* (1936) spoke to audience needs to understand a world in seeming disorder. Musicals such as *42nd Street* (1933) and screwball comedies like *Bringing Up Baby* (1938) provided easy escapism. Gangster movies like *Little Caesar* (1930) reflected the grimy reality of Depression city streets and daily newspaper headlines. Horror films such as *Fran-kenstein* (1931) articulated audience feelings of alienation and powerlessness in a seemingly uncontrollable time. Socially conscious comedies like *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (1936) reminded moviegoers that good could still prevail, and the **double feature** with a **B-movie**—typically a less expensive movie—was a welcome relief to penny-pinching working people.

The second reason the movie business survived the Depression was because of its size and power, both residing in a system of operation called **vertical integration**. Using this system, studios produced their own films, distributed them through their own outlets, and exhibited them in their own theaters. In effect, the big studios controlled a movie from shooting to screening, guaranteeing distribution and an audience regardless of quality.



▼ Screwball comedies such as *Bringing Up Baby* helped Americans escape the misery of the Great Depression.

20th Century Fox Film Corp./ Courtesy Everett Collection

When the 1930s ended, weekly attendance was again over 80 million, and Hollywood was churning out 500 pictures a year. Moviegoing had become a central family and community activity for most people. Yet the end of that decade also brought bad news for the studios. In 1938, the Justice Department challenged vertical integration, suing the big five studios—Warner Bros., MGM, Paramount, RKO, and 20th Century Fox—for restraint of trade; that is, they accused the studios of illegal monopolistic practices. The case would take 10 years to decide, but the movie industry, basking in the middle of its golden age, was under attack. Its fate was sealed in 1939 when the Radio Corporation of America (RCA) made the first public broadcast of television from atop the Empire State Building. The impact of these two events was profound, and the medium would have to develop a new relationship with its audience to survive.

TELEVISION

When World War II began, the government took control of all patents for the newly developing technology of television as well as of the materials necessary for its production. The diffusion of the medium to the public was therefore halted, but its technological improvement was not. In addition, the radio networks and advertising agencies, recognizing that the war would eventually end and that their futures were in television, were preparing for that day. When the war did end, the movie industry found itself competing not with a fledgling medium but with a technologically and economically sophisticated one. The number of homes with television sets grew from 10,000 in 1946 to more than 54 million in 1960 and movie attendance was fully 25% lower than that of even the worst Depression years. Where Americans spent 12.3% of their recreational budget on the movies in 1950, in 1965 they spent only 3.3% (**Menard, 2021**).

THE PARAMOUNT DECISION

In 1948, 10 years after the case had begun, the Supreme Court issued its Paramount Decision, effectively destroying the studios' hold over moviemaking. Vertical integration was ruled illegal, as was **block booking**, the practice of requiring exhibitors to rent groups of movies, often inferior, to secure a better one. The studios were forced to sell off their exhibition businesses (the theaters). Before the Paramount Decision, the five major studios owned 75% of the first-run movie houses in the United States; after it, they owned none. Not only did they no longer have guaranteed exhibition, but other filmmakers now had access to the theaters, producing even greater competition for the dwindling number of movie patrons. In 2020, after nearly 8 decades, a federal court reversed the ruling in recognition of the scores of distribution channels available to moviemakers.

RED SCARE

The US response to its postwar position as world leader was fear. So concerned were some members of Congress that communism would steal the people's rights that Congress decided to steal them first. The Hollywood chapter of the virulent anticommunism movement we now call McCarthyism (after the Republican senator from Wisconsin, Joseph McCarthy, its most rabid and public champion) was led by the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) and its chair, J. Parnell Thomas (later imprisoned for padding his congressional payroll). First convened in 1947, HUAC's goal was to rid

Hollywood of communist influence. The fear was that communist, socialist, and leftist propaganda was being secretly inserted into entertainment films by “Reds,” “fellow travelers,” and “pinkos.” Rather than defend its First Amendment rights, the film industry abandoned those who were even mildly critical of the “Red Scare,” jettisoning much of its best talent at a time when it could least afford to do so. In the fight against television, movies became increasingly tame for fear of being too controversial.

The industry was hurt not only by its cowardice but also by its shortsightedness. Hungry for content, the television industry asked Hollywood to sell its old features for broadcast. The studios responded by imposing on themselves the rule that no films could be sold to television and no working film star could appear on “the box.” When it could have helped shape early television viewer tastes and expectations of the new medium, Hollywood was absent. It lifted its ban in 1958.

FIGHTING BACK



◂ Warren Beatty is gunned down in the climax of the 1967 hit movie *Bonnie and Clyde*.

Warner Brothers/Seven Arts/ Photofest

The industry worked mightily to recapture audiences from television using both technical and content innovations. Some of these innovations remain today and serve the medium and its audiences well. These include more attention to special effects, greater dependence on and improvements in color, and CinemaScope (projecting on a large screen two and one-half times wider than it is tall). Among the forgettable technological innovations were primitive 3D and smellovision (wafting odors throughout the theater).

Innovation in content included spectaculars with which the small screen could not compete. *The Ten Commandments* (1956), *Ben Hur* (1959), *El Cid* (1960), and *Spartacus* (1960) filled the screen with many thousands of extras and lavish settings. Now that television was catering to the mass audience, movies were free to present challenging fare for more sophisticated audiences. The “message movie” charted social trends, especially alienation of youth (*Blackboard Jungle*, 1955; *Rebel Without a Cause*, 1955) and prejudice (*12 Angry Men*, 1957; *Imitation of Life*, 1959; *To Kill a Mockingbird*, 1962). Changing values toward sex were examined (*Midnight Cowboy*, 1969; *Bob and Carol and Ted and Alice*, 1969), as was the new youth culture’s rejection of middle-class values (*The Graduate*, 1967; *Goodbye Columbus*, 1969) and its revulsion/attraction to violence (*Bonnie and Clyde*, 1967). The movies as an

industry had changed, which caused the films themselves to become a medium of social commentary and cultural impact.

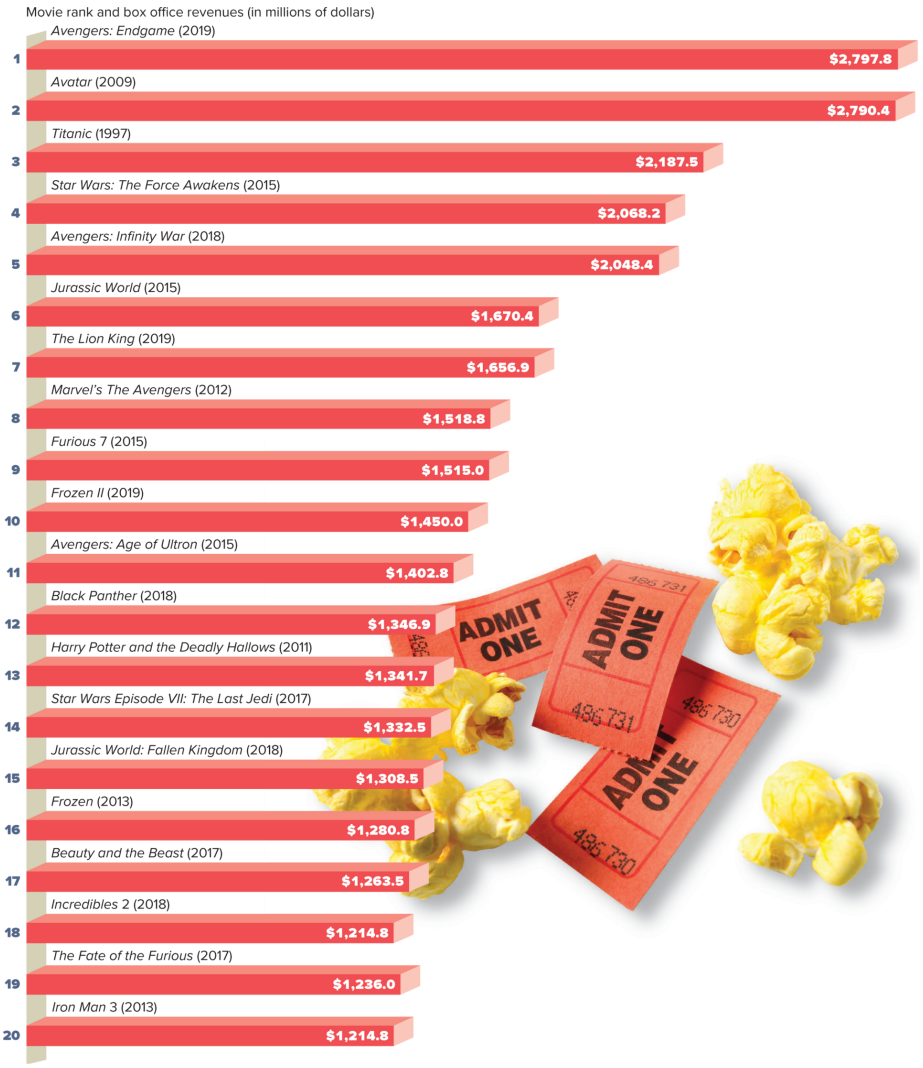
Movies and Their Audiences

We talk of Hollywood as the "dream factory," the makers of "movie magic." We want our lives and loves to be "just like in the movies." The movies are "larger than life," and movie stars are much more glamorous than television stars. The movies, in other words, hold a very special place in our culture. Movies, like books, are a culturally special medium, an important medium. In this sense, the movie–audience relationship has more in common with that of books than with that of commercial television. Just as people buy books, they buy movie tickets. Because the audience, rather than advertisers, is in fact the true consumer, power rests with the audience in film more than it does in television.

Despite changing moviegoer demographics, the major studios continue to create movies as if youngsters and young adults make up the largest portion of the movie audience. There is no question that as age increases, the likelihood of going to the movies decreases (**Watson, 2020**), but that fact hides an ongoing and significant fall-off in movie attendance by young people. Although 18 to 24 year olds are still the largest single-age segment of moviegoers, people under 24 represent only a third of all moviegoers in the United States and Canada (**Barnes, 2020**). The reality is that a majority of all movie tickets sold are bought by people 25 and older.

Nonetheless, despite the fact that many in the industry are indeed producing fare for this more mature audience, major studios' attention and the bulk of their resources continue to be directed at a young audience. As you'll soon read, the reasons are potential income from licensing and product tie-ins (kids love toys, games, and fast food) and overseas ticket sales (audiences don't have to speak English to enjoy superheroes and big explosions). This explains why so many of today's movies and franchises are aimed at youngsters in the form of cartoons (the *Despicable Me* and *Minion* films) and films based on other media such as comic books (*The Avengers* and *Spider-Man* films), popular toys (the *Transformers* franchise), young adult novels (*A Wrinkle in Time* and *Artemis Fowl*), television shows (*The Loud House Movie* and *Baywatch*), and video games (*Assassin's Creed* and *Resident Evil*).

Look at the top 20 worldwide box office hits of all time in **Figure 10.1**, every one of which has earned more than a billion dollars. With the exception of *Titanic* (1997), a special-effects showcase itself, all are fantastic adventure films that appeal to younger audiences. The question asked by serious observers of the relationship between film and culture is whether the medium is increasingly dominated by the wants, tastes, and needs of what amounts to an audience of children. What becomes of film as an important medium, one with something to say, one that challenges people?



▲ **Figure 10.1** Top 20 All-Time Worldwide Box Office Hits (in millions).

Source: ***"Top Lifetime Grosses." (2021)****.*
(photo): Tony Cordoza/Alamy Stock Photo

What becomes of film as an important medium, say Hollywood's defenders, is completely dependent on us, the audience; we get the movies we deserve because we tell the studios what we want by how we spend our money. In 2019 American audiences spent $858 million on *Avengers: Endgame.* Globally, the super hero movie passed the $2 billion mark in just 11 days. That same year moviegoers bought just under $2 billion in tickets on *The Lion King* ($544 million of that in the United States). Box office results like these certainly say something about what audiences want. Industry defenders further argue that films aimed at young people aren't necessarily movies with nothing to say. *Never Rarely Sometimes Always* (2020) and *Plan B* (2021) are "teen films" offering important insight into American society and youth culture, as well as into the topics they explicitly examine, namely, teen abortion and barriers to reproductive health care, especially for young women of color, respectively. In addition, despite Hollywood's infatuation with younger moviegoers, it still produces scores of movies of merit for a wider audience—*12 Years a Slave* (2013), *The Assistant* (2020), *The Imitation Game* (2015), and *First Cow* (2020), for example. All eight Best Picture Academy Award nominees in 2021 were grown-up,

important movies that had much to say about us as a people and as a culture: *The Father, Judas and the Black Messiah, Mank, Minari, Nomadland, Promising Young Woman, Sound of Metal,* and *The Trial of the Chicago 7.*

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If Hollywood is fixated on kid and teen movies, why does it give us such treasures? True, Michael Eisner, as president of Paramount Pictures and then CEO of Disney, famously once wrote in an internal memo, “We have no obligation to make history. We have no obligation to make art. We have no obligation to make a statement. Our only obligation is to make money” (as quoted in **Pulizzi, 2020**). Nevertheless, the movie industry continues to produce films that indeed make history, art, and a statement while they make money. It does so because we buy tickets to those movies.

Scope and Nature of the Film Industry

Hollywood's record year of 1946 saw the sale of more than 4 billion tickets. Today, pandemic-free Americans buy about 1.2 billion movie theater tickets each year. In 2019, domestic box-office revenue was $11.4 billion, and 29 movies exceeded $100 million. Fifty-eight movies topped that amount worldwide; 2 of those—*Avengers: Endgame* and *The Lion King*— were billion-dollar movies. As impressive as these numbers may seem, movie industry insiders feel concern. On a per-capita basis, before the pandemic US moviegoing was at its lowest level in more than a century, and the average number of tickets bought by moviegoers was the lowest (3.5 tickets a year) it has been since 2002 (**Ball, 2020**). Today, about half of all Americans, 46%, go to the movies one time or less a year (**Watson, 2019**). The question the movie industry is asking about the future, then, one you can try to answer yourself after reading the essay, is "Will We Continue to Go to the Movies?"

Three Component Systems

There are three component systems in the movie industry—production, distribution, and exhibition. Each is undergoing significant change in the contemporary digital, converged media environment.

PRODUCTION

Production is the making of movies. Between 700 and 800 feature-length films are produced annually in the United States, a large increase over the early 1980s, when, for example, in 1985, 288 features were produced. As we'll see later in this chapter, significant revenues from electronic sell-through (EST) are one reason for the increase, as is growing conglomerate ownership that demands more product for more markets.

Since the days of the Lumière brothers, movies have been shot on film. Today, almost none are, as film making has shifted to digital production. A handful of big-budget movies, titles requiring a specific look or feel, will shoot on film each year, for example, the Western *The Hateful Eight* (2015), fifties-style musical *West Side Story* (2021), retro super-hero flick *Wonder Woman 1984* (2020), and James Bond-style spy thriller *Tenet* (2020). Nonetheless, film shooting has become so unusual that major providers like Fugifilm and Kodak have ceased production of motion picture stock (**Sax, 2016**).

Another influence of technology can be seen in most of the top-grossing movies of the last few years. *Jurassic World* (2015), *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* (2015), *Captain America: Civil War* (2016), *Deadpool* (2016), *Spider-Man: Homecoming* (2017), *Black Panther* (2018), *Avengers: Endgame* (2019), and *Dune* (2020) are all marvels of digital effects. Digital film-making has made grand special effects not only possible but expected. Stunning special effects, of which *Titanic* (1997) and *Avatar* are fine examples, can make a good movie an excellent one. The downside of computer-generated special effects is that they can greatly increase production costs. *Avatar* cost more than $300 million to produce; *Avengers: Endgame* between $350 and $400 million. The *average* cost of producing and marketing a Hollywood feature is $100 million (Mueller, 2020), a figure inflated, in large part, by the demands of audience-expected digital spectacle.

Many observers see this increase in production costs as a major reason Hollywood studios are less willing to take creative chances in a big-budget film. However, lack of significant box-office growth,

especially in summer blockbuster season, is one indication that moviegoers may be experiencing *special-effects fatigue*. "Today's computer-crazy visual-effects industry . . . has sucked the soul out of commercial cinema by churning out visuals like so much sausage, taking us on an endless journey of dinosaur attacks, superhero mashups, and cities laid to waste that all blends together in viewers' minds," laments film critic Drew Turney (2018, p. 117).



CULTURAL FORUM

Will We Continue to Go to the Movies?

The data tell a troubling tale. The $11.4 billion box-office take of 2019 was a 4% decrease from the previous year, and the 1.24 billion tickets sold were among the smallest number in 25 years (**McNary, 2020**). In fact, in the wake of the 2020 coronavirus shutdown of America's movie houses, which produced an 80% decline in annual box office (**Hoffman, 2021**), 70% of the public said that, in the future, they would rather watch a first-run movie at home than in a theater (**Vary, 2020**). Even the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences publicly expressed concern that moviegoers will "kick the habit," if they already hadn't (**Cieply, 2020**). So an issue often discussed in the cultural forum is, "Will people keep going to the movies?" As you might imagine, there is no shortage of answers.

1. *The last several years have seen too many bad movies.* Only big-budget sequels and higher-priced tickets for 3D movies saved box-office totals from decline. These made up for flops like *Maleficent: Mistress of Evil* (2019), *Call of the Wild* (2020), and *Dolittle* (2020).
2. Not unrelated, *fewer good movies* mean that not as many people are making it to the theater in the first place, denying them the opportunity to see trailers for and get excited about other films.
3. If there are good films, people go to the movies; if not, they go less frequently and they tend to forget about the movies as an option when looking for entertainment. Movie industry people call this *out of sight, out of mind*.
4. But what faces fans when they do arrive at the movies? A very *expensive* outing. The average ticket price has increased at twice the rate of inflation over the last several years, to $12.10. Add to this the cost of the overpriced Goobers, popcorn, and soda and the gas to get there, and "catching a flick" for a family of four comes to $152 per outing . . . quite expensive at a time when the at-home cost for two hours of on-demand movie viewing has dropped to nearly zero (**Sharma, 2020**).
5. And what happens when people get to their seats? The distinct likelihood of *noisy and possibly rude neighbors*, cell phone users, loud talkers, crying babies, and quite possibly antsy children.

6. But surely once the house goes dark, all is well. Well, no. People who have just paid handsomely to be at the movies are then faced with *full-length commercials before the trailers.* Almost every theater in America screens these commercials. And although a majority of Americans dislike them ("3 in 4," 2018), advertisers spend $1.2 billion dollars a year to buy them (Guttman, 2019). It's the movies; not TV!
7. Speaking of TV, this is, in fact, the industry's greatest fear: *new digital technologies*, especially wired homes, video on demand, high-definition smart TVs, and streaming services.
8. People's reliance on sophisticated in-home technologies poses an additional threat to the film industry because it presages a *generational shift away from movies.* It is precisely those young people who will be tomorrow's seat-fillers who are abandoning the theater experience with the least regret.

Enter Your Voice

- Do you go to the movies as much as you did when you were younger? If not, why not?
- If you remain a regular moviegoer, why? What makes the movie going experience worth the effort?
- When the 2020 coronavirus pandemic forced every movie house in the country to close, 37% of movie-goers said they planned to attend less often once the theaters reopened; 10% said they'd never go again (**Vary, 2020**). But director J. J. Abrams said people would indeed come back, sensing "a pent-up, desperate need to see each other—to socialize and have communal experiences" (in **Barnes, 2020**, p. BU7). What about you? Did the pandemic change your movie habits? Did you stay away or go back when theaters reopened?

But another technology, **cloud computing**, is helping moderate production costs. Cloud computing is the storage of system-operating software, including sophisticated and expensive digital and special-effects programs, on off-site, third-party servers hosted on the Internet that offer on-demand, for-lease access. Access to the cloud frees moviemakers, particularly smaller independent producers, from financial and technical limitations that might otherwise have stymied their productions.

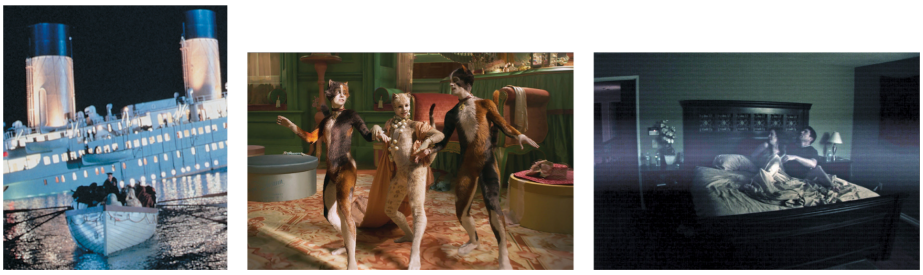
DISTRIBUTION

Distribution was once as simple as making prints of films and shipping them to theaters. Now it means supplying these movies to television networks, cable and satellite networks, makers of DVDs, and Internet streaming companies. In all, a distributor must be able to offer a single movie in hundreds of different digital formats worldwide to accommodate the specific needs of the many digital retailers it must serve. The sheer scope of the distribution business ensures that large companies (most typically the big studios themselves) will dominate. In addition to making copies and guaranteeing their delivery, distributors now finance production and take responsibility for advertising and promotion and for setting and adjusting release dates.

The advertising and promotion budget for a Hollywood feature usually equals 50% of the production costs. Sometimes, the ratio of promotion to production costs is even higher. *Avengers: Endgame* may have cost upwards of $400 million to produce, but its studio, Disney, spent another $150 million in marketing and promotion, bringing the total to over half a billion dollars, the most expensive movie ever made (**Mullaney, 2019**). So spending almost as much to market a film as to make it is now standard practice, and the investment is seen as worthwhile, if not necessary. In fact, so important has promotion become to the financial success of a movie that studios such as Universal and MGM include their advertising and marketing people in the **green light process**, that is, the decision to make a picture in the first place. These promotion professionals can say yes or no to a film's production, and they must also declare how much money and effort they will put behind the film if they do vote yes.

Another important factor in a film's promotion and eventual financial success is the distributor's decision to release it to a certain number of screens. One strategy, called the **platform rollout**, is to open a movie on a few screens and hope that critical response, film festival success, and good word-of-mouth reviews from those who do see it will propel it to success. Naturally, the advantage of this approach for the distributor is that it can greatly reduce the cost of promotion. 20th Century Fox opened *The Post* on nine screens just before Christmas Day, 2017. It went into wide release—2,819 screens—3 weeks later after strong word of mouth and several film festival awards. It earned its producers more than $180 million on a production budget of $50 million (**"The Post," 2018**). Films likely to suffer at the hands of critics or from poor word of mouth—for example, *Underwater* (2020; 2,791 US screens) and *Pan* (2015; 11,000 screens globally)—typically open in thousands of theaters simultaneously. However, it is not uncommon for a potential hit to open on many screens, as *Avatar* did in 2009—on more than 18,300 worldwide—and as did *Avengers: Endgame,* which opened on 4,662 American screens in 2019.

EXHIBITION



▲ Critics assailed *Titanic* for its weak storyline and two-dimensional characters, but the real stars of the world's first billion-dollar box-office hit were the special effects. Grand special effects, however, are no guarantee of success. Special-effects-laden *Cats* was an all-time box-office stinker, costing $200 million to make and promote but earning only $75 million worldwide in 2019, while 2009's *Paranormal Activity*, devoid of technical wizardry and made in seven days for $45,000, earned $170 million in global box office that year.

(left) 20th Century Fox/Courtesy Everett Collection; (middle) UNIVERSAL/WORKING TITLE FILMS/AMBLIN ENTERTAINMENT/APL Archive/Alamy Stock Photo; (right) Moviestore collection Ltd/Alamy Stock Photo

There are currently 41,000 movie screens in the United States spread over 6,000 sites. The three largest American movie chains are AMC Entertainment (8,200 screens), Regal Cinemas (7,307 screens), and Cinemark USA (4,499 screens). These three control half of all the country's screens and sell nearly 80% of all tickets. AMC and Cinemark have significant overseas presences, and AMC (Chinese) and Regal (British) have foreign ownership.



Critically acclaimed *The Post* opened on nine US screens; critically panned *Underwater* opened on 2,791. Can you guess why?

(left) Ysanne Slide/Moviestore collection Ltd/Alamy Stock Photo; (right) BFA/Alamy Stock Photo

It is no surprise to any moviegoer that exhibitors make much of their money on concession sales of items that typically have an 80% profit margin, accounting for 40% of a theater's profits. This is the reason that matinees and budget nights are attractive promotions for theaters. A low-priced ticket pays dividends in overpriced popcorn and Dots. It's also the reason that 60% of moviegoers sneak contraband food into the theater (**Friedman, 2014**). Profits from concessions are also why many exhibitors present more than movies to keep seats filled and concessions flowing. Most theaters routinely schedule stand-up comedians, the NFL and NBA in 3D, live opera performances, big-name musical concerts, classic TV show marathons, and audience-participative screenings sometimes enhanced by airline-like dual pod seating, play areas, wine bars, restaurants and cafés, reserved seating, concierge desks, reclining leather seats, old-fashioned uniformed ushers, and touchpad gourmet-food ordering. Because 50% of America's movie seats typically go empty on the weekend, 75% on weekdays (**Ebiri, 2020**), exhibitors are engaging in a variety of other audience-friendly maneuvers, for example, loyalty programs, expanded ticket discounts, and subscription offers.

The Studios

Studios are at the heart of the movie business, and it's the studios that come to mind when we talk about Hollywood. There are major studios, corporate independents, and independent studios. The majors, who finance their films primarily through the profits of their own business, include Warner Bros., Columbia, Paramount, 20th Century Fox (owned by Disney), Universal, MGM/UA, and Disney. The **corporate independent studios** (so named because they produce movies that have the look and feel of independent films) include Sony Pictures Classics, New Line Cinema (Warner), Searchlight (Disney), and Focus Features (Universal). These companies are in fact specialty or niche divisions of the majors, designed to produce more sophisticated—but less costly—fare to (1) gain prestige for their parent studios and (2) earn significant cable, EST, and DVD income after their critically lauded and good word-of-mouth runs in the theaters. Focus Features, for example, is responsible for 2005 Best Picture Oscar winner *Brokeback Mountain* and 2018 nominee *Darkest Hour*; Searchlight is home to four recent Best Picture winners—*Slumdog Millionaire* (2008), *12 Years a Slave* (2013), *Birdman* (2014), and *The Shape of Water* (2018); New Line Cinema released the three *Lord of the Rings* films and all the *Rush Hour* movies; and Sony Pictures Classics brought to the screen Best Picture nominees *An Education* (2009), *Whiplash* (2014) and *Call Me By Your Name* (2017).

Despite the majors' and their specialty houses' big names and notoriety, they produce only about one-fifth of each year's feature films. The remainder come from independent studios, companies that raise money outside the studio system to produce their films. Lionsgate and Weinstein Company (renamed Lantern Entertainment in 2018) are two of the few remaining true independents in Hollywood, producing films like *Silver Linings Playbook*, *The Hateful Eight*, *The Imitation Game*, and the *Halloween* movies (Lantern Entertainment), as well as *The Hunger Games* trilogy, the *Twilight Saga*, the *Saw* and Tyler Perry movies, and the *Divergent* series (Lionsgate). Five of 2019's highest domestic grossing movies were from Lionsgate: *John Wick...Parabellum*, *Knives Out*, *Tyler Perry's Family Funeral*, *Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark*, and *Midway*. But countless other independents continue to churn out films, often with the hope of winning a distribution deal with one of the Hollywood studios. For example, *Paranormal Activity* was distributed by Paramount, which paid $300,000 for the rights; 2005 Oscar winner for Best Picture, *Crash*, from Stratus Films, was distributed by Lionsgate; and the 2004–2005 $100 million box-office hit *Million Dollar Baby*, from independent Lakeshore, was distributed by Warner Bros.

Independent films tend to have smaller budgets. Often this leads to much more imaginative filmmaking and more risk-taking than the big studios are willing to undertake. The 1969 independent film *Easy Rider*, which cost $370,000 to produce and made over $60 million in ticket sales, began the modern independent film boom. *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (2002) cost $5 million to make and earned over $300 million in global box-office receipts. Some independent films with which you might be familiar are *Magic Mike* (2012), *Concrete Cowboy* (2020), Oscar winners for Best Screenplay *Pulp Fiction* (1994) and *The Pianist* (2002), 2015 Best Picture nominees *Brooklyn* and *Room*, *Boyhood* (2014), *Us* (2019), and Best Picture Oscar winners *Moonlight* (2017), *The Hurt Locker* (2009), and *Parasite* (2019).

A greater number of independents is now reaching audiences because of several factors, including a dramatic drop in what it costs to shoot and edit a movie on digital equipment (2018's hit horror movie *Unsane* from big-name director Steven Soderbergh was shot on three iPhones) and a drop in the cost of promoting a movie because of social media and websites such as YouTube. This low-cost-of-entry/reasonable-chance-of-success state of affairs has seen entry into the indie movie market from an increasingly wider array of sources. For example, *The Canyons* (2013) starring Lindsay Lohan; Zach Braff's *Wish I Was Here* (2014); Spike Lee's *Da Sweet Blood of Jesus* (2014); and the *Veronica Mars* movie (2013) are all independent films that were financed through online crowdfunding on Kickstarter, as was 2015's *Kung Fury*. Biographical portrait of Vincent van Gogh, *Loving Vincent* (2017), another Kickstarter flick starring big names such as Saoirse Ronan *(Lady Bird, Brooklyn)* and Chris O'Dowd *(Bridesmaids, The Cloverfield Paradox*), won several national and international film awards.

Another factor is filmmakers' ability to distribute a movie using the Internet, either independently—using a platform dedicated specifically to that purpose such as MUBI—or through large-scale established operations such as Netflix and iTunes, as did the producers of *Snowpiercer* (2014) and *The Florida Project* (2017). In 2015, Netflix began producing features and Amazon announced plans to produce 12 films a year, screen them in theaters for a month or two, and then make them available to its Amazon Prime subscribers. Two years later, its *Manchester by the Sea* was the first movie from a streaming service to ever be nominated for an Academy Award. These "new indies" were joined in 2017 by Apple, which began producing feature-length movies for distribution on its Apple Music and Apple TV+ streaming services.

This perfect case study on the disruption wrought by convergence is not necessarily a welcomed development in filmland. If almost all production is digital, and virtually all distribution is digital, and digital video companies produce and distribute their works that sometimes debut in theaters, sometimes online, sometimes day-and-date, and sometimes in their own theaters (Netflix bought the legendary movie house Grauman's Egyptian in Los Angeles in 2020), what, ask many industry people, actually constitutes a "movie"? In fact, complaints about Netflix in particular forced industry-essential film festival Cannes to establish "theatrical distribution in France" as a requirement for entry into its legendary film competition, and for the American Academy Awards, at least a 1-week run in one of a handful of designated cities is required for Oscar eligibility (**Alter, 2020**).



Indie movie *Parasite* not only won the Oscar for Best Picture in 2020, it had a global box office take of over $258 million.

NEON/MOVIESTORE COLLECTION LTD/Alamy Stock Photo



The smash success of *Easy Rider* (1969) ushered in the indie film boom.

Courtesy of Everett Collection

Trends and Convergence in Moviemaking

Flat box office, increased production costs largely brought about by digital special-effects wizardry, and the "corporatization" of the independent film are only a few of the trends reshaping the film industry. There are several others, however, including some that many critics see as contributors to Hollywood's changing future.

Conglomeration and the Blockbuster Mentality

Other than MGM (itself bought by Amazon in 2021 for $8.45 billion), each of the majors is part of a large conglomerate. Paramount is owned by Viacom; Warner Bros. is part of the huge AT&T family of holdings; Disney is part of the giant conglomerate formed in the 1996 Disney/Capital Cities/ABC union; and Universal was bought by NBC's parent company, General Electric, in 2004 and later by cable TV giant Comcast in 2013. In 2018, Disney bought 20th Century Fox for $71 billion. According to many critics, this concentration of ownership forces the industry into a **blockbuster mentality**—filmmaking characterized by reduced risk-taking and more formulaic movies. Business concerns are said to dominate artistic considerations as accountants and financiers control more decisions once made by creative people.

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"The most ominous change," in movie making, says Academy Award winning director Martin Scorsese, "has happened stealthily and under cover of night: the gradual but steady elimination of risk. Many films today are perfect products manufactured for immediate consumption. Many of them are well made by teams of talented individuals. All the same, they lack something essential to cinema: the unifying vision of an individual artist. Because, of course, the individual artist is the riskiest factor of all" (2019, p. A27).

One of the surest ways to limit risk is green-lighting **concept films**—movies that can be described in one line. *Godzilla* is about a giant, rogue monster. *Jurassic Park* is about giant, rogue dinosaurs. *Transformers* is about good giant alien robots who fight bad giant alien robots. International ownership and international distribution contribute to this phenomenon. High-concept films that depend little on characterization, plot development, and dialogue are easier to sell to foreign exhibitors than are more sophisticated films. *Fantastic Four* and other Marvel Comics heroes play well everywhere. Big-name stars also have international appeal. That's why they can command huge salaries. The importance of foreign distribution cannot be overstated.

Very few features make a profit on American box office. Much of their eventual profit comes from overseas sales. For example, 2016's *The Gods of Egypt* earned $31 million in US box office and another $113 million abroad; 2019's *Ralph Broke the Internet* took home $23 million domestically but $132 million globally. And it's not just domestic disappointments that do well overseas. The top-2 money makers of 2019, *Avengers: Endgame* ($858 million at home; $1.9 billion globally) and *The Lion King* ($543 million at home and $1.1 billion globally) both doubled their domestic take. Overseas box office accounts for about 70% of a studio movie's total ticket sales, and every one of the all-time top 20 Hollywood box office champions made more money abroad than it did domestically.

Critics contend that the blockbuster mentality has created an overreliance on a specific form of concept movie, the **IP-based movie**, productions based on intellectual property (IP)— that is, already existing stories, products, imaginary worlds, or characters that have a built-in fan base. We see this dependence-on-the-familiar play out in the abundance of sequels, remakes, and franchises that make their way to the big screen and in the scores of television, comic book, and video-game remakes that do so, as well.

MERCHANDISE TIE-INS

Another byproduct of blockbuster thinking is merchandise tie-ins. Films are sometimes produced as much for their ability to generate a market for nonfilm products as for their intrinsic value as movies. Hit 2012 kids' film *The Lorax* had more than 70 "product partners." *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* made $2 billion at the box office and nearly $6 billion more in merchandise sales. The Harry Potter films have earned nearly $8 billion in ticket sales but over $25 billion in merchandise fees (**Shelton, 2020**). In one year, 2019, one studio alone, Disney, collected $57.4 billion in licensing fees (**Richter, 2021**). And as almost all of us know, it is nearly impossible to buy a meal at McDonald's, Burger King, or Taco Bell without being offered a movie tie-in product. Studios often believe it is riskier to make a $7 million film with no merchandising potential than a $250 million movie with greater merchandising appeal.

PRODUCT PLACEMENT

Many movies are serving double duty as commercials. We'll discuss this $20 billion a year global phenomenon in detail later in the chapter as a media literacy issue.

Convergence Reshapes the Movie Business

So intertwined are today's movie and television industries that it is often meaningless to discuss them separately. As much as 70% of the production undertaken by the seven largest studios is for smaller screens, and the percentage of their revenues from that source ranges between 35% and 45% (**Dawson, 2016**). But the growing relationship between **theatrical films**—those produced originally for theater exhibition—and television is the result of technological changes in the latter. The convergence of film with satellite, cable, VOD, pay-per-view, DVD, and Internet streaming has provided immense distribution and exhibition opportunities for the movies. For example, in 1947 box-office receipts accounted for 95% of the studios' film revenues. Now they make up just 20%. Today's distributors make three times as much from domestic home entertainment (DVD, network and cable television, EST, and streaming) as they do from rentals to movie theaters.





▲ *West Side Story* danced across movie screens in 1961 and again in 2021.

(left) SNAP/Entertainment Pictures/Alamy Stock Photo; (right) Twentieth Century Studios/Entertainment Pictures/Alamy Stock Photo

Although still lucrative, DVD sales are a declining source of studio income (**Arnold, 2020**). In 2012, for the first time, Americans spent more money downloading and streaming movies than they did buying discs, a trend that has since accelerated. This is because there is nothing to physically manufacture and ship for digital distribution of movies, so studio profit margins are much higher than can be realized with DVDs. Where a solid box-office performer–*The Hangover* (2009), for example–could once sell 10 million discs in its first six months of release, today's movies are far more likely to be downloaded for a few dollars on VOD, bought on EST, or streamed from a subscription service rather than purchased as a disc for $15.

The convenience of digital movies has encouraged this digital distribution and exhibition. In 2014 Paramount announced that it would no longer release movies on film in the United States, with the other majors quickly following suit (**Scott & Dargis, 2014**). As a result, almost all American movie screens have been converted to digital exhibition. Digital exhibition's savings in money and labor to both exhibitor and distributor are dramatic. Rather than making several thousand film prints to be physically transported to individual theaters in metal cans, the electronic distribution of digital movies costs under $100 per screen for the entire process (**Stewart & Cohen, 2013**).

Although once slowed by fears of piracy, the online distribution of feature films to homes is now routine. An American home with Internet and cable access has tens of thousands of full-length movies and television shows to choose from at any given moment. Netflix, which originally delivered DVDs to people's homes by mail, has discontinued that service in every country other than the United States, where it still services 2 million subscribers. Now focusing on streaming, it operates in 190 countries, bringing its subscriber total to 167 million, with 65 million in the United States alone (**Moody, 2020**).

Netflix is not the only source for streamed movies; Internet giants Google Play, Amazon Prime, Apple TV+, Disney+, and the Comcast cable operation are only a few of the more than 270 online video streaming services available to American audiences, offering everything from classic and niche films to the latest box-office hits (**Barnes, 2019**). In addition, and as you read in **Chapter 2**, there are multiple companies offering day-and-date digital home delivery of feature films.

But it was Universal's announcement in the midst of the 2020 coronavirus closure of the world's movie houses that put the threat of digital distribution to the future of in-theater exhibition into stark relief. When the Comcast cable company-owned studio announced it would begin releasing its movies directly to consumers for $20 each, it not only ignited an exhibitor boycott of any future releases, it forced the industry as a whole to reconsider the long-standing 90-day **theatrical window**–the time from when a movie is first released to theaters until it can be sold directly to retailers and the public. Not only do newcomers like Netflix and Amazon Prime ignore that tradition, but what, other than protecting exhibitor profits, studios asked, was sacred about 90 days, especially when those studios retained 80% of all digital rental and purchase fees compared to 50% of box office sales (**Friedman, 2020**)?

Finally, direct-to-home digital distribution of movies may be even more robust than described here because of new technologies that free downloads from the computer screen. For example, Netflix, LG

Electronics, Amazon, and TiVo all sell devices that allow downloads directly to TV set-top boxes, avoiding the computer altogether; and with Apple Airplay, you can even send content from your iPhone or iPad to play through on a smart TV. See **Chapter 10** for more about Internet distribution of film and video content.

Digital production has had an additional effect beyond encouraging digital distribution and exhibition. The surprise 1999 hit *The Blair Witch Project* is considered the start of the growing **microcinema** movement through which filmmakers using digital video cameras and desktop digital editing programs are finding audiences, both in theaters and online, for their low-budget (sometimes as little as $10,000) features. The 2009 success of *Paranormal Activity* reinforced interest in microcinema, interest that has been buoyed by the willingness of A-list talent to get involved with these "small" pictures; for example, Rashida Jones (*Parks and Recreation*), Andy Samberg (*Saturday Night Live*), and Elijah Wood (*The Lord of the Rings*) teamed up on *Celeste and Jesse Forever* (2012), and 2016's *Brother Nature* starred Bill Pullman (*Independence Day*) and Rita Wilson (*Mama Mia! Here We Go Again*).

DEVELOPING MEDIA LITERACY SKILLS

Recognizing Product Placements

Transformers (the toy) may be the stars of several movies by that name, but they share screen time with General Motors cars, apparently the only brand-name vehicles in Los Angeles or whatever other city needs saving. The 9 nominees for the 2020 Academy Award Best Picture collectively had placements for 350 brands across 135 different types of products. Together, they took in $166 million in product placement advertising. *Ford vs. Ferrari* made $55.8 million from 145 brands; *The Irishman* $34.7 million from 62; and *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood* made $31.3 million from 87 different sponsors (**"Product Placement," 2020**).

The practice of placing brand-name products in movies is not new. The 1920's Buster Keaton silent feature *Garage* had one of the first placements (Red Crown Gasoline); Hollywood's first Best Picture Oscar winner *Wings* featured Hershey chocolate bars; and in 1951 Katherine Hepburn famously dumped Gordon's gin into the river from *The African Queen* (**Smith, 2020**).

But in today's movie industry, product placement has expanded into a business in its own right. About 100 product placement agencies are operating in Hollywood, and there's even an industry association, the Entertainment Resources and Marketing Association (ERMA). The attraction of product placements for sponsors is obvious. For one flat fee paid up front, a product that appears in a movie is in actuality a commercial that lives forever—first on the big screen, then on purchased and rented discs, downloads, and streaming, and then on television and cable. That commercial is also likely to have worldwide distribution.

Many people in and outside the movie industry see product placement as inherently deceptive. "Why not identify the ads for what they are?" From a media literacy standpoint, the issue is the degree to which artistic decisions are being placed second to obligations to sponsors.

Scripts are altered and camera angles are chosen to accommodate paid-for placements. For example, laundry detergent Tide replaced Britain's Daz in the script of *The Theory of Everything* (2014) because it was more familiar to American audiences. Apple refuses to allow cinema bad guys to use iPhones (**Sharf, 2020**). These may seem like a small concessions, but what of the many other small and large ones of which the audience is unaware? Media critic Emily **Nussbaum (2015)** sees the problem as even deeper than altered scripts; she sees betrayal:

> There is no art form that doesn't run a three-legged race with the sponsors that support its production, and the weaker an industry gets . . . the more ethical resistance flags. But readers [of novels] would be grossed out to hear that [autobiographical novelist] Karl Ove Knausgaard had accepted a bribe to put the Talking Heads into his childhood memories. They'd be angry if Stephen Sondheim slipped a Dewar's jingle into [his musical] *Company.* That's not priggishness or élitism. It's a belief that art is powerful, that storytelling is real, that when we immerse ourselves in that way it's a vulnerable act of trust. (p. 99)

But, argue defenders of the practice, there is no betrayal; products are part of everything we do in everyday life. All the products around us have brand names. Isn't it a lie to suggest that the things we come into constant contact with don't have logos?

Knowing how media content is funded and how that financial support shapes content is an important aspect of understanding the mass communication process. Therefore, an awareness of the efforts of the movie industry to maximize income from its films is central to good film literacy.

Does it trouble you that content is altered, even if sometimes only minimally, to allow for these brand identifications? To what extent would script alterations have to occur to accommodate paid-for messages before you find them intrusive? Do you think it is fair or honest for a moviemaker who promises you film content in exchange for your money to turn you into what amounts to a television viewer by advertising sponsors' products?

Literate film consumers may answer these questions differently, especially as individuals hold cinema in varying degrees of esteem—but they should answer them. And what do you make of the recent Hollywood product placement trend, **branding films**, the sponsor-financing of movies to advance a manufacturer's product line. Unilever (Dove soap) co-financed *The Women* (2008), and Chrysler underwrote *Blue Valentine* (2010). Marriott underwrote *Two Bellmen* (2015) and its two sequels (2016 and 2017). *Uncle Drew* (2018) is a feature-length movie/commercial financed by soda maker Pepsi based on a character in its TV commercials, an elderly, out-of-shape basketball fan, played in the ad and in the movie by real professional basketball player Kyrie Irving.

And in a marriage of branded films with IP themes, makers of copyrighted and trademarked materials now produce films featuring those things, such as *The Lego Movies* and *The Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle Movies*. Hasbro, the world's second-largest toy maker, was once content to co-finance a picture a year based on its popular board games such as Candy Land and Monopoly. Then, in 2014, it announced it would begin producing movies in its own studio, Allspark Pictures. *My Little Pony* and *Jem and the Holograms* were its first two releases. Mattel Toys did the same in 2018, founding Mattel Films, to bring properties like Barbie, Hot Wheels, American Girl, and Thomas & Friends to the big screen. The goal, said company CEO Ynon Kreiz, was to "to shift the company away from manufacturing toys and toward managing and monetizing its brands" (in **Forbes, 2018**).

A media-literate movie fan, maybe one who was a child at one point in life, might ask not only when did movies become brands, but when did toys become brands to be managed and monetized?



▸ Even product placement is unnecessary when the brand is the star of the movie. Here's Mattel's Barbie headlining *Rock 'N Roll Royals*.

Atlaspix/Alamy Stock Photo

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Introduction to Chapter 11

About This Chapter

The upcoming chapter takes us through the issues and many of the most important court cases involving the freedoms of speech and press as they relate to the media industry. The issues discussed in this chapter are some of the most important and most relevant things you will read about in this book. Challenges to media and press rights are common and evolving, with new situations and technological innovations constantly forcing reconsideration of our country's basic values and laws. This introduction fills in a few of the key omissions in the chapter. As I write this introduction, there are new challenges to media expression in the area of humor and political satire. By the time you read this there will probably be other tests of press and media rights. If, as Thomas Jefferson famously said, the price of freedom is eternal vigilance, this is one of the areas where we as citizens must make especially sure to be knowledgeable and diligent.

WHAT TO FOCUS ON

Focus on the material in this introduction. In the upcoming chapter pay attention to "A Short History of the First Amendment." After that just focus on the key words, important people, and questions you should be able to answer.

Introductory Information About Media Freedom

Equal Time

In 1934, congress passed a new Communications Act that updated the nation's laws and regulations involving broadcast communications. **Section 315 of the 1934 Communications Act** outlined regulations that eventually became known at the **equal time rules**. "The rules are quite simple. If a broadcasting station permits one legally qualified candidate for any elective public office to use its facilities, it must afford an equal opportunity fall all other legally qualified candidates for the same office."[1] Practically speaking, this meant that whatever access and opportunity a station gives to one candidate must also be available to the others in the same race. If a station sells ad time to one candidate, it must give other candidates in that race the opportunity to buy ads at equivalent prices. If the first candidate is allowed to use the station's facilities, the others must be as well. Similarly, if a station gives the first candidate free time—in whatever form, whether it is a block of time the candidate can use as they wish or an appearance on a program—then other candidates in that race must have the opportunity to have the same amount of free time. That's a pretty powerful series of regulations when it comes to providing competing political candidates equal access to the vital broadcast market. However, these regulations have since been significantly weakened.

In 1959, congress amended section 315. At the time, serious consideration was given to repealing this section of the law in its entirety, so these amendments should be viewed as a congressional response to intense lobbying from the broadcast networks, among others. The 1959 amendments spelled out four situations in which broadcasters no longer had to abide by the equal time rules: candidate appearances on legitimate news programs, candidate appearances in legitimate news interviews, candidate appearances in spot coverage of a legitimate news event, and candidate appearances in news documentaries where the candidate is not the subject of the documentary. The impact of these changes has been that the equal time rules are not enforced nearly as much as they were before 1959, and stations that give time to candidates tend to do so primarily in the context of news broadcasts.

Focus on Critical Thinking: How Does Disney Still Own Mickey Mouse?

Copyright is one of the few business-related rights spelled out in the U.S. Constitution. In Section 8 of Article 1, the Constitution declares that congress shall have the power "To promote the Progress of Science and useful Arts, by securing for limited Times to Authors and Inventors the exclusive Right to their respective Writings and Discoveries."[2] When the Copyright Act of 1790 was passed, the length of the protection congress saw fit to grant to authors and inventors was 14 years, with another 14 years available upon request. In 1831, it was changed to a possible total of 42 years, and in 1909 the upper limit was extended to 56 years. Since that time, there has been a suspicious convergence of copyright laws and the financial interests of one company: Disney. The company first asserted its copyright over Mickey Mouse in 1928. In 1976, when congress was in the middle of revamping copyright laws, Disney lobbied hard for a major extension of protections for its increasingly valuable copyrights. Congress

responded by extending copyright protections to cover the life of the author/inventor plus 50 years. At the time, this was the standard protection available in much of Europe.[3] When the Disney copyrights threatened to expire again in 2003, however, congress again obliged the company by extending protections to the life of the creator plus 70 years.

Mickey Mouse will enter the public domain in 2024. Will congress act to protect Disney's interests again? The answer according to industry analysts appears to be no. Technology policy journalist Timothy B. Lee reports that "hardly anyone is pushing for another extension" because "there's now a broad grassroots engagement on copyright issues" that has already shown its strength by defeating the Stop Online Piracy Act in 2012.[4] Disney recently allowed Winnie the Pooh—which it purchased the rights to in the 1960s—to enter the public domain without mounting a public campaign to change copyright laws. It's always possible that things will change, but it seems like the days of congress passing laws to ensure Disney's copyright over its primary characters may be over. So that's it, right? Pretty soon everyone will be able to make their own Mickey Mouse and Winnie the Pooh cartoons, right? Hahahahaha. That's funny. No, of course you won't.

"A company like Disney enjoys several layers of legal protection for a major character like Mickey Mouse. It owns the copyright to the original character. It owns the copyrights to subsequent versions of the character, which tend to be better known to modern audiences. And it also owns trademark rights."[5] This means the company only lost protection of the 1920s-era version of Winnie the Pooh characters, which don't look familiar to most modern audiences. In 2024, Disney is losing its copyright protection to the 1928, black-and-white, *Steamboat Willie* version of Mickey Mouse, not any of the subsequent versions. You won't be able to produce your own Mickey merch in color until much later, and there are countless other little details about the world's most famous mouse that have changed (and been newly copyrighted) over the years. If you're wondering why Disney has been so fond of creating live action versions of its most famous films—whether in the form of theatrical productions or live-action movies—copyright law is part of the answer. "Each embellishment" of a favorite Disney character or story "starts a copyright clock ticking for that new embellishment, thus extending Disney's ownership."[6]

Even when Disney loses all its copyrights related to a particular character or movie, they will still be able to prevent you from making your own products using the less reliable but still powerful **trademarks** they have for every character. Trademarks are legal designations that allow you to protect words, phrases, designs, or some combination of those things that identifies a company's goods or services and distinguishes them from those of other companies. A trademark is supposed to let companies do things like protect their logos from being copied by competitors. Unlike copyright, which protects an entire artistic work like a play or a movie, trademarks are much more targeted and are never lost as long as they are being used regularly. So, for example, Disney has trademarked the name "Mickey Mouse," as well as the names of every character they have used. They have trademarked specific clips from movies and short films, as well as trademarking the association of a character's name with the concept of a live performance. As a result, Disney characters "may effectively never join the public domain, granting to Disney a level of protection akin to a permanent copyright."[7]

Why does this matter? Companies like Disney make huge profits and regularly churn out beloved films, television shows, and every form of related merchandising you can possibly imagine. So what if they get to restrict even their very old characters from entering the public domain? The answer to this question is that the public domain does a lot of good things for us. First, the public domain creates a

vast storehouse of artistic expression that is not dependent on ownership. That means that we actually get access to various different kinds of art, regardless of whether a corporation wants us to. If that seems like a strange thing to talk about, consider the fact that Disney regularly "**vaults**" their movies. When they do that, the movie in question is no longer available for sale or streaming for several years. This has been done not only to films originally produced by Disney, but also to films Disney controls through its conglomerate ownership. This situation underlines the fact that the public domain protects access to works of art from being restricted by the whims of corporate ownership. And that access is important. Public domain protection gives artists of all sorts access to ideas that aren't restricted because one company chose to restrict them. The public domain allows artists the ability to create innovative new works that are based on or influenced by old works—to explore aspects of characters or stories that don't fall in line with a corporate owner's branding or public image.

The second major benefit of the public domain is that it maintains access to a common human cultural heritage. The creativity of the ages is something we should all get to benefit from, whether in terms of sheer enjoyment or in terms of its utility as inspiration for other works of art and science. However, companies are increasingly trying to turn that heritage into something they can market and, ultimately, restrict. Disney is a good example of this dynamic. "Disney's properties are frequently built on public domain works, borrowing from myths, legends, folk stories, fairy tales, and other narratives that are free for the taking. However, once Disney builds a movie around these pieces of common intellectual property, it then tries to use copyright law to deprive other people of access to these public domain properties."[8] Because Disney has such extensive resources, it is fully capable of pursuing legal action against anyone who even arguably infringes its copyright and trademark claims. This can result in a sort of chilling effect. Let's say you are considering writing a musical about the life of the ancient Greek hero Heracles. Do you really want to fight Disney's legal department when they (inevitably) claim that you are infringing on their rights to the hero under the name "Hercules?" My guess is that you don't. As a result, you might choose not to pursue this project at all, effectively giving Disney veto power over any creative artistry dealing with a mythological character whose creation preceded the company's founding by thousands of years. And this is only one example. Companies like Disney have more and more control over the public domain "This is worrisome because, in ways that are rarely appreciated, the public domain is critical to the progress of creativity, innovation, science, culture, higher education, the Internet, democratic governance and business."[9] In other words, if we allow big media corporations like Disney to infringe on (and, ultimately, own) the public domain, we may find ourselves in a situation where innovation is severely restricted to those who work for those corporations. Copyright is supposed to spur innovation by making it profitable to come up with new ideas and creative works, but we are in danger of allowing copyright law to crush innovation entirely.

Humor, Parody, and Satire

One of the most prominent kinds of speech that has been protected by the First Amendment and the Supreme Court is humor. "From colonial-era editorial cartoons to satirical online news websites to the Washington 'Gridiron Club Dinner,' comedy, satire, and political humor have occupied a hallowed place in the American political system since before the country's birth."[10] In the landmark First Amendment case of *New York Times Co. v. Sullivan* in 1964, the Supreme Court declared that the United States has "a profound national commitment to the principle that debate on public issues should be uninhibited, robust, and wide-open, and that it may well include vehement, caustic, and

sometimes unpleasantly sharp attacks on government and public officials."[11] That commitment was specifically extended to humorous speech by the Court in ***Hustler Magazine v. Falwell***. In its 1988 opinion in the case, the Court ruled that "The sort of robust political debate encouraged by the First Amendment is bound to produce speech that is critical of those who hold public office or those public figures who are 'intimately involved in the resolution of important public questions or, by reason of their fame, shape events in areas of concern to society at large.' Justice Frankfurter put it succinctly. . . when he said that one of the prerogatives of American citizenship is the right to criticize public men and measures. Such criticism, inevitably, will not always be reasoned or moderate."[12]

There are, however, limits to the protections afforded to comedy by the First Amendment. Humorous speech (or performance or advertisement or movie or song or whatever) can still be punished if three things are true. First, the speech must make a claim that is presented as fact, not opinion. Second, the claim made must be false. Finally, there must be proof of actual malice, something the upcoming chapter will discuss at greater length.[13] Since *Sullivan* and *Hustler*, courts have consistently ruled that comedic speech is hard for a reasonable person to interpret as factual. So, if I said that Justin Bieber was a lizard creature from the death planet of Apokolips, a reasonable person would understand that I was just expressing an opinion about the pop star's talent and character, rather than trying to make a serious claim regarding his species or planet or origin. However, if your pet rat disappears around Bieber, don't say I didn't warn you.

What to Study

KEY WORDS

Section 315 of the 1934 Communications Act (equal time rules)

Trademarks

Vaulting

Hustler Magazine Co. v. Falwell

First Amendment

Self-righting principle

Absolutist position

The Alien and Sedition Acts

Joseph Burstyn, Inc. v. Wilson

CBS v. Democratic National Committee

Valentine v. Christensen

Time, Inc. v. Hill

Abridgment (time, place, and manner)

Clear and Present Danger

Schenck v. United States

Ad hoc balancing of interests

Irvin v. Dowd Chandler v. Florida

Chandler v. Florida

Libel and Slander

New York Times v. Sullivan

Actual malice

Prior restraint

Near v. Minnesota

The Pentagon Papers (***New York Times v. United States***, 1971)

The Progressive case (***United States v. Progressive, Inc.***)

Roth v. United States

Miller v. State of California

Traffic cop analogy

Fairness Doctrine

Copyright

Public Domain

Fair use

Social Responsibility Theory

Shield law

IMPORTANT PEOPLE

John Milton

Mark Fowler

QUESTIONS YOU SHOULD BE ABLE TO ANSWER

- What were the 1959 amendments to Section 315 of the 1934 Communication Act, and what was the impact of those amendments?
- What has been the general trend of the amount of time federal law protects copyright? How long do copyright protections currently last in the U.S.? What company seems primarily responsible for the last two changes in the law? Will the law change again in the future?
- When a Disney character or film loses its copyright, what happens? How if at all is that character or film still protected? What do the recent live action Disney movies have to do with all of this?
- What's the difference between a trademark and a copyright, and how do trademarks impact Disney's characters? What are the two main benefits of the public domain? How do Disney's intellectual property claims create a chilling effect on innovation?
- Why has the Supreme Court ruled that comedy is generally protected by the First Amendment? Under what circumstances can humorous speech still be punished?
- How is abridgment related to the absolutist position, and what does that all mean for free speech?
- What are the 3 defenses against libel and slander? How are those defenses different when the person being targeted is a public figure?
- What are the three elements of the modern definition of obscenity

- What have been the most notable impacts of deregulation of the media on freedom of expression and the press?
- How long does copyright protect your intellectual property?
- What are the 4 requirements for something to be considered fair use?
- What are the 7 core assumptions of social responsibility theory?

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Media Freedom, Regulation, and Ethics

11



Whether or not to publish images of protesters who can be easily identified and punished by authorities or harassed by extremists is one of many ethical dilemmas facing media professionals.

Jelani Photography/Shutterstock



UP UNTIL NOW, EVERYTHING HAD BEEN RIGHT ABOUT THE JOB.

Editor of a major college daily newspaper makes a great résumé entry; you are treated like royalty at school events; and you get to do something good for your campus and, if you do your job well, even for the larger world out there. But as the tension around you grows, you start to wonder if it's all worth it.

First, there was issue of the paper's coverage of hate on campus and in the country. The FBI had announced that hate-based violence had reached a 16-year high (**Shattuck & Risse, 2021**), so you thought this difficult issue should not be ignored. The staff was on board but balked at using terms in their reporting such as *white supremacists*, *racists*, *bigots*, and *Nazis*. They wanted to use the labels many of those people had given themselves, *alt-right* or *militias*. You're the editor, you reminded them, and you want clear language in your

stories. “Those who spew hate and racism aren’t alt-anything; the so-called militias are more vigilantes than patriots,” you argued, maybe a bit too angrily.

“But we want to be fair,” was the counter. “If that’s what they want to be called, is it our place to say otherwise?”

“Yes, it is” you explained. “A militia, is supposed to be well-regulated, formed to supplement a legitimate army in an emergency, not to create chaos. And *alt-right* is a meaningless euphemism; *alternative* to what? Murders don’t get to call themselves *alternative population managers*.

“We don’t have to be neutral in our rejection of bigotry,” argued your assistant editor, “just neutral in our choice of words.”

You snap at him, “We are journalists! We are truthful, not neutral. It isn’t our job to tidy up who these people are, what they say, and what they stand for. Our job as journalists is to tell the truth, right?”

Hearing no answer, you waded into the issue of a change in the AP Stylebook, your paper’s writer’s guide. The news service had recently amended its advice on how to report on incidents of police use of firearms. “Avoid the vague ‘officer-involved’ for shootings and other cases involving police,” it stated. “Be specific about what happened.”

“But what if the police use the term. They’re the authorities; shouldn’t we quote them?” asked one staffer.

The AP is clear on this as well, you responded, “If police use the term, ask: How was the officer or officers involved? Who did the shooting? If the information is not available or not provided, spell that out” (**Associated Press, 2020**).

This, too, did not sit well with many of your colleagues, who rejected your argument that the passive construction of “officer-involved shooting” hides who the shooter is and who was shot. Although the phrase has been in journalistic use since the early 1970s (**Frazier, 2020**), you explained, again maybe a little too vehemently, journalists don’t need the AP stylebook to tell them that a straightforward declarative sentence—subject, transitive verb, object—is not only good grammar but good reporting.

In these instances, you’ve argued in favor of more, rather than less clarity, more straightforward reporting and less obfuscation. This is America; who can have a problem with that? The first article on your series on racism in America is headlined, “Racists and Bigots Demean a Great Country.” And before you even have the opportunity to edit away even one “officer-involved shooting,” you get 37 angry phone calls and e-mails, 4 longtime advertisers pull their regular weekly ads, and your assistant editor and two other staffers quit the paper.

These conflicts, routinely faced by real college and professional editors, highlight two important lessons offered in this chapter. First, what is legal and permissible may not always be what is right; even seemingly routine choices, such as word style, carry important implications. Second, when media practitioners do try to do the right thing, they have to consider the interests, needs, and values of others besides themselves.

In this chapter, we look at how the First Amendment has been defined and applied over time. We study how the logic of a free and unfettered press has come into play in the area of broadcast deregulation. We also detail the shift in the underlying philosophy of media freedom from libertarianism to social responsibility theory. This provides the background for our examination of the ethical environment in which media professionals must work as they strive to fulfill their socially responsible obligations.

A Short History of the First Amendment

The US Constitution mentions only one industry by name as deserving special protection— the press. Therefore, our examination of media regulation, self-regulation, and ethics must begin with a discussion of this "First Freedom."

The first Congress of the United States was committed to freedom of the press. The First Amendment to the new Constitution expressly stated that "Congress shall make no law . . . abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press." As a result, government regulation of the media must be not only unobtrusive but also sufficiently justified to meet the limits of the First Amendment. Media industry self-regulation must be sufficiently effective to render official restraint unnecessary, and media practitioners' conduct should be ethical in order to warrant this special protection.

Early Sentiment for a Free Press

Democracy—government by the people—requires a free press. The framers of the Bill of Rights understood this because of their experience with the European monarchies from which they and their forebears had fled. They based their guarantee of this privileged position to the press on **libertarianism**, the philosophy of the press asserting that good and rational people can tell right from wrong if presented with full and free access to information; therefore, censorship is unnecessary. Libertarianism is based on the **self-righting principle**, originally stated in 1644 by English author and poet John Milton in his book *Areopagitica.* His argument was simple: The free flow or trade of ideas, even bad or uncomfortable ones, will inevitably produce the truth because a rational and good public will correct, or right, any errors.

However, even the First Amendment and libertarian philosophy did not guarantee freedom of the press. The Alien and Sedition Acts were passed a scant eight years after the Constitution was ratified, making it illegal to print criticism of government or its leaders. And Milton himself was to become the chief censor of Catholic writing in Oliver Cromwell's English government.



The 1787 Philadelphia Constitutional Convention. Because they knew democracy could not survive otherwise, the framers of the Constitution wrote the First Amendment to guarantee that the new nation would enjoy freedom of speech and press.

MPI/Archive Photos/Getty Images

Defining and Refining the First Amendment

Clearly, the idea of freedom of the press needed some clarification. One view is housed in the **absolutist position**, which is expressed succinctly by Supreme Court Justice Hugo Black:

> No law means no law. . . . My view is, without deviation, without exception, without any ifs, buts, or whereases, that freedom of speech means that government shall not do anything to people, either for the views they have or the views they express, or the words they speak or write. (***New York Times v. United States,* 1971**)

Yet the absolutist position is more complex than this would suggest. Although absolutists accept that the First Amendment provides a central and fundamental wall of protection for the press and free expression, several questions about its true meaning remained to be answered over time.

WHAT DOES "NO LAW" MEAN?

The First Amendment said that the US Congress could "make no law," but could state legislatures? City councils? Mayors? Courts? Who has the power to proscribe the press? This issue was settled in 1925 in a case involving the right of a state to limit the publication of a socialist newsletter. The Supreme Court, in *Gitlow v. New York,* stated that the First Amendment is "among the fundamental personal rights and 'liberties' protected by the due process clause of the Fourteenth Amendment from impairment by the states" (**Gillmor & Barron, 1974**, p. 1). Given this, "Congress shall make no law" should be interpreted as "government agencies shall make no law." Today, "no law" includes statutes, laws, administrative regulations, executive and court orders, and ordinances from government, regardless of locale.

WHAT IS "THE PRESS"?

Just what "press" enjoys First Amendment protection? The Supreme Court, in its 1952 *Joseph Burstyn, Inc. v. Wilson* decision, declared that movies are protected expression. In 1973, Justice William O. Douglas wrote in ***CBS v. Democratic National Committee* (1973)**,

> What kind of First Amendment would best serve our needs as we approach the 21st century may be an open question. But the old fashioned First Amendment that we have is the Court's only guideline; and one hard and fast principle has served us through days of calm and eras of strife, and I would abide by it until a new First Amendment is adopted. That means, as I view it, that TV and radio . . . are all included in the concept of "press" as used in the First Amendment and therefore are entitled to live under the laissez faire regime which the First Amendment sanctions.

Advertising, or commercial speech, enjoys First Amendment protection. This was established by the Supreme Court in 1942. Despite the fact that the decision in *Valentine v. Christensen* went against the advertiser, the Court wrote that just because expression was commercial did not necessarily mean that it was unprotected. Some justices argued for a "two-tiered" level of protection, with commercial expression being somewhat less worthy of protection than noncommercial expression. But others argued that this was illogical because almost all media are, in fact, commercial, even when they perform a primarily journalistic function. Newspapers, for example, print the news to make a profit, as do podcasts and websites.

In its 1967 *Time, Inc. v. Hill* decision, the Supreme Court applied similar logic to argue that the First Amendment grants the same protection to entertainment content as it does to nonentertainment content. Is an entertainingly written news report less worthy of protection than one that is dully written? Rather than allow the government to make these kinds of narrow and ultimately subjective judgments, the Supreme Court has consistently preferred expanding its definition of protected expression to limiting it.

WHAT IS "ABRIDGMENT"?

Abridgment is the curtailing of rights, and even absolutists accept the idea that some curtailment or limits can be placed on the time, place, and manner of expression—as long as the restrictions do not interfere with the substance of the expression. Few, for example, would find it unreasonable to limit the use of a sound truck to broadcast political messages at 4:00 a.m. But the Supreme Court did find unconstitutional an ordinance that forbade all use of sound amplification except with the permission of the chief of police in its 1948 decision in *Saia v. New York*. The permissibility of other restrictions, however, is less clear-cut.

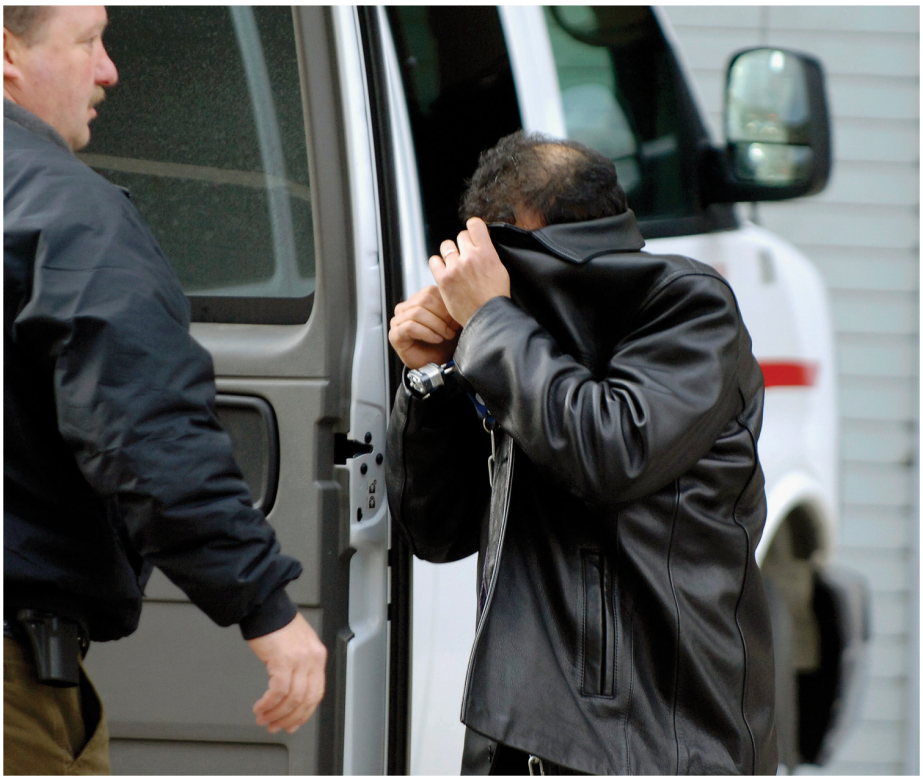
CLEAR AND PRESENT DANGER

Can freedom of the press be limited if the likely result is damaging? The Supreme Court answered this question in 1919 in *Schenck v. United States.* In this case involving the distribution of a pamphlet urging illegal resistance to the military draft during World War I, Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes wrote that expression could be limited when "the words used are used in such circumstances and are of such a nature as to create a clear and present danger that they will bring about the substantive evils that Congress has a right to prevent." Justice Holmes added, "Free speech would not protect a man in falsely shouting fire in a theater and causing panic." This decision is especially important because it firmly established the legal philosophy that there is no absolute freedom of expression; the level of protection is one of degree.

BALANCING OF INTERESTS

This less-than-absolutist approach is called the **ad hoc balancing of interests**. That is, in individual First Amendment cases several factors should be weighed in determining how much freedom the press is granted. In his dissent to the Court's 1941 decision in *Bridges v. California*, a case involving a *Los Angeles Times* editorial, Justice Felix Frankfurter wrote that freedom of speech and press is "not so absolute or irrational a conception as to imply paralysis of the means for effective protection of all the freedoms secured by the Bill of Rights. . . . In the cases before us, the claims on behalf of freedom of speech and of the press encounter claims on behalf of liberties no less precious."

FREE PRESS VERSUS FAIR TRIAL



Is the man here, accused of drug dealing, guilty or innocent? If he is guilty, he should want to cover his face to hide his identity. But if he is innocent, wouldn't he be just as likely to want to hide his identity? Perp walks raise the issue of unfair pretrial publicity.

Don Heupel/AP Images

One example of the clash of competing liberties is the conflict between free press (First Amendment) and fair trial (Sixth Amendment). This debate typically takes two forms: (1) Can pretrial publicity deny citizens judgment by 12 impartial peers, thereby denying them a fair trial? (2) Should cameras be allowed in the courtroom, supporting the public's right to know, or do they so alter the workings of the court that a fair trial is impossible?

Courts have consistently decided in favor of fair trial in conflicts between the First and Sixth Amendments, but it was not until 1961 that a conviction was overturned because of pretrial publicity. In *Irvin v. Dowd* the Court reversed the death sentence conviction of accused killer Leslie Irvin because his right to a fair trial had been hampered by extremely prejudicial press coverage. As a result of this negative reporting, of 430 potential jurors screened before the trial by attorneys, 370 said they were

already convinced Irvin was guilty. Although "tainted" by pretrial publicity, four of the 370 were seated as jurors. The Court determined that Irvin's trial was therefore unfair.

Print reporters have long enjoyed access to trials, but broadcast journalists have been less fortunate. In 1937, after serious intrusion by newspaper photographers during the 1935 trial of Bruno Hauptmann, accused of kidnapping the baby of transatlantic aviation hero Charles Lindbergh, the American Bar Association (ABA) adopted Canon 35 as part of its Code of Judicial Ethics. This rule forbade cameras and radio broadcasting of trials. In 1963 the ABA amended the canon to include a prohibition on television cameras. Nine years later the ABA replaced Canon 35 with Canon 3A(7), allowing some videotaping of trials for specific purposes but reaffirming its opposition to the broadcast of trial proceedings.

But in 1981 the Supreme Court, in *Chandler v. Florida*, determined that television cameras in the courtroom were not inherently damaging to fairness. Today, all 50 states allow cameras in some courts —47 permit them in trial courts—and the US Congress periodically debates opening federal courts, including the Supreme Court, to cameras. For now, photography and broadcast of federal trials is banned by Federal Rule of Criminal Procedure 53. These limits persist despite the fact that two-thirds of Americans favor cameras in the Supreme Court, whose proceedings are otherwise released in transcripts and audio recordings (**Bonazzo, 2018**).

A related conflict between free press and fair trial involves seemingly routine images of the accused, typically in handcuffs, being escorted by law officers. These so-called perp walks often suggest guilt, but in our judicial system, no one is guilty until convicted at trial.

An extension of this issue is the growing use of mugshot galleries, especially online. These police photos are powerful click magnets, but they suffer from multiple problems beyond their suggestion of guilt. One is the implied seriousness of the crime; the mugshot of a murderer and that of a parent arrested protesting cuts in school funding not only look the same, but also often appear in the same gallery. Another is the lack of follow-up reporting. If the accused is acquitted and the posting site bothers to publish that fact, which most do not, it is far too late to undo any damage—for example, lost careers, friendships, and reputation. In 2021 the AP announced it would cease publishing accounts of minor crimes "driven" by embarrassing or odd-looking mugshots (**Daniszewski, 2021**).

LIBEL AND SLANDER

Libel, the false or malicious publication of material that damages a person's reputation, and **slander**, the oral or spoken defamation of a person's character, are not protected by the First Amendment. The distinction between libel and slander, however, is sufficiently narrow so that "published defamation, whether it is in a newspaper, on radio or television, in the movies, or whatever, is regarded since the 1990s as libel. And libel rules apply" (**Pember, 1999**, p. 134). Therefore, if a report (1) defames a person, (2) identifies that person, and (3) is published or broadcast, it loses its First Amendment protection.

A report accused of being libelous or slanderous, however, is protected if it meets any one of three tests. The first test is *truth.* Even if a report damages someone's reputation, if it is true, it is protected. The second test is *privilege.* Coverage of legislative, court, or other public activities may contain information that is not true or that is damaging to someone's reputation. The press cannot be deterred from covering these important news events for fear that a speaker's or witness's comments will open it

to claims of libel or slander. The third test is *fair comment*; that is, the press has the right to express opinions or comment on public issues. For example, theater and film reviews, however severe, are protected, as is commentary on other matters in the public eye.

For public figures, however, a different set of rules applies. Because they are in the public eye, public figures are fair game for fair comment. But does that leave them open to reports that are false and damaging to their reputations? The Supreme Court faced this issue in 1964 in *New York Times v. Sullivan.* In 1960, the Committee to Defend Martin Luther King bought a full-page ad in *The New York Times* asking people to contribute to Dr. King's defense fund. The ad detailed abuse of Dr. King and other civil rights workers at the hands of the Montgomery, Alabama, police. L. B. Sullivan, one of three elected commissioners in that city, sued the *Times* for libel. The ad copy was not true in some of its claims, he said, and because he was in charge of the police, he had been "identified."

The Supreme Court ruled in favor of the newspaper. Even though some of the specific facts in the ad were not true, the *Times* had not acted with **actual malice**. The Court defined the standard of actual malice for reporting on public figures as *knowledge of its falsity or reckless disregard* for whether or not it is true.

PRIOR RESTRAINT

There is much less confusion about another important aspect of press freedom, **prior restraint**. This is the power of the government to *prevent* the publication or broadcast of expression. US law and tradition make the use of prior restraint relatively rare, but there have been a number of important efforts by government to squelch content before dissemination.

In 1931, the Supreme Court ruled in *Near v. Minnesota* that freedom from prior restraint was a general, not an absolute, principle. Two of the four exceptions it listed were in times of war when national security was involved and when the public order would be endangered by the incitement to violence and overthrow by force of orderly government. These exceptions were to become the basis of two landmark prior restraint decisions. The first, involving *The New York Times*, dealt with national security in times of war; the second, focusing on protecting the public order, involved publishing instructions for building an atomic bomb.



Daniel Ellsberg, who gave the Pentagon Papers to *The New York Times*, celebrates that paper's Supreme Court victory.

Bettmann/Getty Images

On June 13, 1971, at the height of the Vietnam War, *The New York Times* began publication of what became known as the Pentagon Papers. The papers included detailed discussion and analysis of the conduct of that unpopular war during the administrations of presidents Kennedy and Johnson. President Nixon's National Security Council (NSC) had stamped them top secret. Believing that this was an improper restriction of the public's right to know, NSC staff member Daniel Ellsberg gave copies to the *Times.* After the first three installments had been published, the Justice Department, citing national security, was able to secure a court order stopping further publication. Other newspapers, notably *The Washington Post* and *The Boston Globe*, began running excerpts while the *Times* was silenced until they, too, were enjoined to cease.

On June 30, 1971, the Supreme Court ordered the government to halt its restraint of the *Times*'s and other papers' right to publish the Pentagon Papers. Among the stirring attacks on prior restraint written throughout its decision was Justice Hugo Black's:

> In the First Amendment the Founding Fathers gave the free press the protection it must have to fulfill its essential role in our democracy. The press was to serve the governed, not the governors. The Government's power to censor the press was abolished so that the press would remain forever free to censure the Government. The press was protected so that it could bare the secrets of government and inform the people. Only a free and unrestrained press can effectively expose deception in government. (***New York Times v. United States,* 1971**)

OBSCENITY AND PORNOGRAPHY

Another form of media expression that is not protected is **obscenity**. Two landmark Supreme Court cases established the definition and illegality of obscenity. The first is the 1957 *Roth v. United States* decision. The Court determined that sex and obscenity were not synonymous, a significant advance for freedom of expression. It did, however, legally affirm for the first time that obscenity was unprotected expression. The definition or test for obscenity that holds even today was expressed in the 1973 *Miller v. State of California* decision. Chief Justice Warren Burger wrote that the basic guidelines must be

> (a) whether the average person, applying contemporary community standards, would find that the work, taken as a whole, appeals to the prurient interest, (b) whether the work depicts or describes, in a patently offensive way, sexual conduct specifically defined by the applicable state law, and (c) whether the work, taken as a whole, lacks serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value.

The problem for the courts, the media, and the public, of course, is judging content against this standard. For example, what is patently offensive to one person may be quite acceptable to others. What is serious art to one may be serious exploitation to another. And what of an erotic short story written by an author in New York City for a website hosted by a company in Memphis and accessed and read by people in Peoria? Whose community standards would apply?

An additional definitional problem resides in **pornography**. Pornography is protected expression. The distinction between obscenity and pornography may, however, be a legal one. Sexually explicit content is pornography (and protected) until a court rules it illegal; then it is obscene (and unprotected). The difficulty of making such distinctions can be seen in Justice Potter Stewart's famous declaration in ***Jacobellis v. Ohio* (1964)**, "I may not be able to come up with a definition of pornography, but I certainly know it when I see it," and his dissent two years later in ***Ginzburg v. United States* (1966)**, "If the First Amendment means anything, it means that a man cannot be sent to prison merely for distributing publications which offend a judge's sensibilities, mine or any others." Clearly, the issues of the definition and protection of obscenity and pornography may never be clarified to everyone's satisfaction.

Ongoing Issues of Freedom and Responsibility

The First Amendment has application to a number of specific issues of media responsibility and freedom, including indecency, deregulation, and copyright laws. Though all Americans typically say they support the First Amendment and the guaranteed freedom of speech and press, these three issues continue to bedevil even the amendment's staunchest supporters.

INDECENCY

Obscenity and pornography are rarely issues for broadcasters. Their commercial base and wide audience make the airing of such potentially troublesome programming unwise. However, broadcasters frequently do confront the issue of **indecency**. According to the FCC, indecent language or material is that which depicts sexual or excretory activities in a way that is offensive to contemporary community standards.

The FCC recently modified, much to broadcasters' dissatisfaction, its way of handling indecency complaints, making it easier for listeners and viewers to challenge questionable content. Stations must now prove they are innocent; in other words, a complaint has validity by virtue of having been made. To broadcasters, this "guilty until proven innocent" approach is an infringement of their First Amendment rights, as it requires them to keep tapes of all their content in the event they are challenged, even in the absence of evidence that a complaint has merit.

The debate over indecency, however, has been confounded by a number of events. First, a huge surge in complaints (from 111 in the year 2000 to more than a million in 2004) followed two specific broadcast events: the split-second baring of Janet Jackson's breast at the 2004 Super Bowl football game and rocker Bono's spontaneous award-show utterance of an expletive later that year. Even though the FCC's own data revealed that 99.9% of the complaints, most with identical wording,

originated with one group, the conservative Christian Parents Television Council, it still boosted indecency fines by 100% (Rich, 2005; Sound-bites, 2005).

Then, faced with penalties of up to $325,000, there was a series of high-profile incidents of broadcaster self-censorship, among them CBS affiliates' refusal to air *9/11 Camera at Ground Zero* honoring the New York City police, firefighters, and other rescue personnel who lived and died on that tragic day because some on-screen rescuers uttered curses as they fought through the inferno. The award-winning documentary had aired four years earlier without a single complaint. Citing examples such as this, lawsuits by NBC and Fox eventually made their way in 2012 to the Supreme Court which, in its unanimous *FCC v. Fox* decision, overturned the commission's indecency rulings, not because the FCC had no right to make such judgments but because it did not give broadcasters "fair notice" as to what was and was not permissible; that is, the rules were too vague to be constitutional (Barnes, 2012).

Today, the commission regulates language that is so "grossly offensive" to "members of the public" that it becomes a "nuisance." However, language found "grossly offensive" just a few years ago is quite common in our everyday conversations today. As such, the FCC acts in only the most egregious cases.

DEREGULATION

The difficulty of balancing the public interest and broadcasters' freedom is at the heart of the debate over deregulation and the relaxation of ownership and other rules for radio and television. Changes in ownership rules have always been controversial, but relaxation of the regulation of broadcasters' public service obligations and other content controls have provided just as much debate.



In 2006, worried about heavy FCC indecency fines, several CBS affiliates chose not to run a documentary honoring the 9/11 rescue effort because several of the first responders in it cursed as they fought smoke, debris, and fear. The award-winning movie had aired four years earlier without complaint.

Anthony Correia/Getty Images News/Getty Images

The courts have consistently supported the FCC's right to evaluate broadcasters' performance in serving the public interest. Naturally, that evaluation must include some judgment of the content

broadcasters air. Broadcasters long argued that such "judgment" amounted to unconstitutional infringement of their First Amendment freedom. Many listeners and viewers saw it as a reasonable and quite small price to pay for the use of their (the public's) airwaves (see **Chapter 7**'s discussion of this once industry-welcomed trade off).

The Supreme Court resolved the issue in 1943 in *National Broadcasting Co. v. United States.* NBC argued that the FCC was no more than a traffic cop, limited to controlling the "flow of traffic." In this view, the regulation of broadcasters' frequency, power, times of operation, and other technical matters was all that was constitutionally allowable. Yet the Court turned what is now known as the **traffic cop analogy** against NBC. Yes, the justices agreed, the commission is a traffic cop. But even traffic cops have the right to control not only the flow of traffic but its composition as well. For example, drunk drivers can be removed from the road. Potentially dangerous "content," such as cars with faulty brakes, can also be restricted. It was precisely this traffic cop function that required the FCC to judge content. The commission was thus free to promulgate rules such as the **Fairness Doctrine**, which required broadcasters to cover issues of public importance and to be fair in that coverage, and **ascertainment**, which required broadcasters to ascertain or actively and affirmatively determine the nature of their audiences' interest, convenience, and necessity.

However, the Fairness Doctrine, ascertainment, and numerous other regulations, such as rules on children's programming and overcommercialization, disappeared with the coming of deregulation during the Reagan and Clinton administrations. License renewal, for example, was once a long and detailed process for stations, which had to generate thousands of pages of documents to demonstrate that they not only knew what their audiences wanted and needed but had met those wants and needs. The burden of proof in their efforts to keep their licenses rested with them. Had they been fair? Had they kept commercial time to acceptable levels? What was their commitment to news and public affairs?

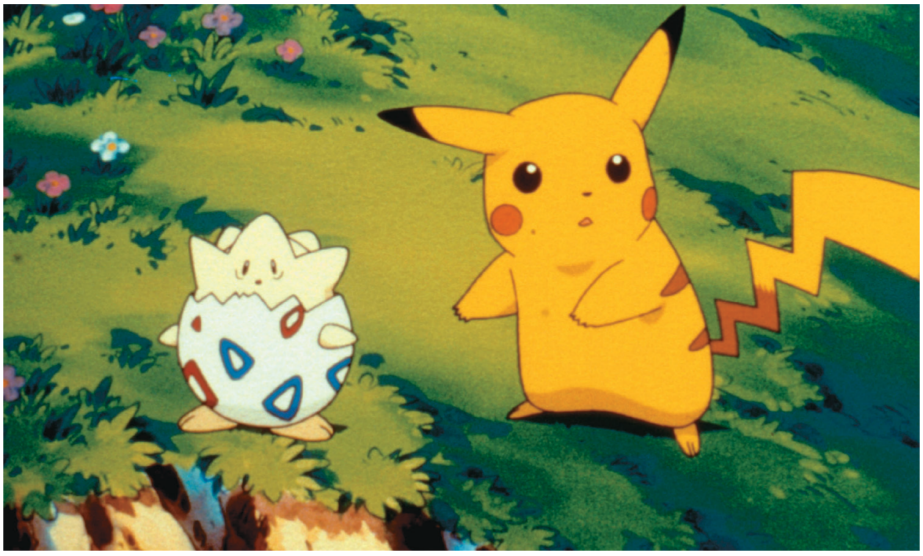
Now deregulated, renewal is conducted through a much less onerous process that satisfies broadcasters but angers advocates of greater media responsibility. Broadcasters simply file brief quarterly reports with the commission indicating compliance with technical and other FCC rules. Then, when their licenses are up for renewal (every eight years), they file a short, postcard-like renewal application. This may be convenient for broadcasters, but former FCC commissioner Michael **Copps (2014)** calls this an "automatic, no-questions-asked eight-year extension . . . nothing more than conferring monopoly power with no public oversight" (p. 38).

The deregulation drive began in earnest with President Reagan's FCC chair, Mark Fowler, in the 1980s. Fowler rejected the trustee model of broadcast regulation, believing that "the market" was the audience's best protector. He said that special rules for the control of broadcasting were unnecessary, likening television to just another home appliance. He called television no more than "a toaster with pictures."

This view of deregulation is not without its critics. Republican and Democratic congressional leaders, liberal and conservative columnists, and numerous public interest groups from across the political spectrum continue to campaign against such fruits of deregulation as concentration, conglomeration, overcommercialization, the abandonment of regulation of children's television, the lowering of decency standards, and the debasement of news. Their argument for rolling back the deregulation of broadcasting rests in the philosophy of noted First Amendment scholar Alexander

Meiklejohn (1960), who argued more than half a century ago that what is forbidden is regulation limiting the media's freedom, "but not legislation to enlarge and enrich it." He continued:

> The freedom of mind which benefits members of a self-governing society is not a given and fixed part of human nature. It can be increased and established by learning, by teaching, by the unhindered flow of accurate information, by giving men health and vigor and security, by bringing them together in activities of communication and mutual understanding. And the federal legislature is not forbidden to engage in that positive enterprise of cultivating the general intelligence upon which the success of self-government so obviously depends. On the contrary, in that positive field the Congress of the United States has a heavy and basic responsibility to promote the freedom of speech. (pp. 19–20)



Broadcast deregulation produced a rush of toy-based children's television shows such as *Pokémon*, which critics contend are inherently unfair to children who cannot recognize them as program-length commercials.

Warner Bros./Courtesy of Everett Collection

COPYRIGHT

The First Amendment protects expression. *Copyright*—identifying and granting ownership of a given piece of expression—is designed to protect the creator's financial interest in that expression. Recognizing that the flow of art, science, and other expression would be enhanced by authors' financial interest in their creation, the framers of the Constitution wrote Article I, Section 8 (8), granting authors exclusive rights to their "writings and discoveries." A long and consistent history of Supreme Court decisions has ensured that this protection would be extended to the content of the mass media that have emerged since that time.

The years 1978 and 1998 saw extensive rewritings of US copyright law. Copyright now remains with creators (in all media) for the span of their lives, plus 70 years. During this time, permission for the use of the material must be obtained from the copyright holder, and if financial compensation (a fee or royalty) is requested, it must be paid. Once the copyright expires, the material passes into the **public domain**, meaning it can be used without permission.

The exception to copyright is *fair use*, instances in which material can be used without permission or payment. Fair use includes (1) limited noncommercial use, such as photocopying a passage from a novel for classroom use; (2) use of limited portions of a work, such as excerpting a few lines or a

paragraph or two from a book for use in a magazine article; (3) use that does not decrease the commercial value of the original, such as videotaping a daytime football game for private, at-home evening viewing; and (4) use in the public interest, such as *Consumer Reports*'s use of pieces of drug company television commercials to highlight its media literacy efforts.

Two specific applications of copyright law pertain to recorded music and cable television. Imagine the difficulty cable companies would have in obtaining permission from all the copyright holders of all the material they import and deliver to their subscribers. Yet the cable operators do make money from others' works—they collect material from original sources and sell it to subscribers. The solution to the problem of compensating the creators of the material carried by cable systems was the creation of the Copyright Royalty Tribunal, to which cable companies paid a fee based primarily on the size of their operations. These moneys were then distributed to the appropriate producers, syndicators, and broadcasters. Congress abolished the Copyright Royalty Tribunal in 1993, leaving cable copyright issues in the hands of several different arbitration panels under the auspices of the Library of Congress.

Now imagine the difficulty songwriters would have in collecting royalties from all who use their music—not only film producers and radio and television stations, but also bowling alleys, supermarkets, and restaurants. Here the solution is the **music licensing company**. The two biggest are the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers (ASCAP) and Broadcast Music Inc. (BMI). Both collect fees based on the users' gross receipts and distribute the money to songwriters and artists.

THE INTERNET AND EXPANDING COPYRIGHT

The Internet has forced a significant rethinking of copyright, one that disturbs many advocates of free expression. They fear that efforts to protect the intellectual property rights of copyright holders are going too far. The expansion of copyright, argues technology writer Dan **Gillmor (2000)**, gives "the owners of intellectual property vast new authority, simultaneously shredding users' rights" (p. 1C). The American Civil Liberty Union agrees, "Any system to enable easier enforcement of copyrights runs the risk of creating a chilling effect with respect to speech online" (in **Kelly, 2019**).

For example, in January 2000, a California superior court, citing the Digital Millennium Copyright Act, ruled the posting of DVD decryption software to be illegal (see **Chapter 13**). The defendants argued that they did not violate copyright. The court ruled against them because they posted "tools" on the Web that might allow others to violate copyright. Tech writer **Gillmor (2000)** scoffed, "Let's ban cars next. Were you aware that bank robbers use them for getaways?" (p. 6C). In August of that same year, a New York court reaffirmed the ban on posting decryption software, adding that even posting links to sites offering the software is a violation of copyright.

Copyright exists, say critics of its expansion, to encourage the flow of art, science, and expression, and it grants a financial stake to creators, not to enrich those creators but to ensure that there is sufficient incentive to keep the content flowing. "It's always important to remember that copyright is a restriction on free speech, and it's a constitutionally granted restriction on free speech," argued copyright expert Siva Vaidhyanathan (in **Anderson, 2000**, p. 25). In other words, tightening copyright restrictions can have the effect of inhibiting the flow of art, science, and expression.

The **digital rights management (DRM)** debate escalated with the Supreme Court's 2005 *MGM v. Grokster* decision. The entertainment industries were heartened by the ruling that a technology was illegal if it "encouraged" copyright infringement; digital rights activists and technologists were appalled. The Court had rejected Hollywood's 1984 challenge to videotape (*Sony Corp. v. Universal City Studios*, the so-called *Betamax* decision) precisely because VCR, even if some people used it to violate copyright, had "substantial non-infringing uses." But *Grokster*, argued its critics, changed that standard from a technology's primary, legal use to the question of whether innovators "created their wares with the 'intent' of inducing consumers to infringe" (**Gibbs, 2005**, p. 50).

As we've seen at several junctures of this text, a reassessment of DRM and copyright is under way, as the involved parties seem to be seeking accommodation. One effort is Creative Commons, a nonprofit corporation founded in 2001 as an easy way for people to share and build on the work of others, consistent with the rules of copyright. Creative Commons provides users with free licenses and other legal tools to mark (copyright) their creative work with the level of freedom they wish it to carry, granting to others specific rights to share, remix, or even use it commercially.

As for the traditional media companies, all the major record labels now sell their catalogs with no DRM. Low-cost streaming of virtually all movie and television content is ubiquitous. Most of the world's books will soon find themselves living online with quite robust reader access. Most big media companies are embracing websites such as YouTube, TikTok, and Facebook, willing to forfeit a bit of DRM control in exchange for exposure of their content.

The future of copyright and DRM, then, is being negotiated in the culture right now. You and other media consumers sit on one side of the table; the media industries are on the other. You will be in a stronger position in these cultural negotiations if you approach these developments as a media-literate person.

Social Responsibility Theory

As we saw at the beginning of this chapter, the First Amendment is based on the libertarian philosophy that assumes a fully free press and a rational, good, and informed public. However, we have also seen in this chapter that the media are not necessarily fully free. Government control is sometimes allowed. Corporate control is assumed and accepted.

During the 1930s and 1940s, serious doubts were also raised concerning the public's rationality and goodness. As World War II spread across Europe at the end of the 1930s, libertarians were hard-pressed to explain how Nazi propaganda could succeed if people could in fact tell right from wrong. As the United States was drawn closer to the European conflict, calls for greater government control of press and speech at home were justified by less-than-optimistic views of the "average American's" ability to handle difficult information. As a result, libertarianism came under attack for being too idealistic.

Time magazine owner and publisher Henry Luce then provided money to establish an independent commission of scholars, politicians, legal experts, and social activists (but no journalists) who would study the role of the press in American society and make recommendations on how it should best operate in support of democracy. The Hutchins Commission on Freedom of the Press, named after its chairperson, University of Chicago chancellor Robert Maynard Hutchins, began its work in 1942 and, in 1947, produced its report "The Social Responsibility Theory of the Press."

Social responsibility theory is a **normative theory**—that is, it explains how media should *ideally* operate in a given system of social values—and it is even today the standard against which the public should judge the performance of the US media (Luo, 2020).

Social responsibility theory asserts that media must remain free of government control but, in exchange, media must serve the public. The core assumptions of this theory are a cross between libertarian principles of freedom and practical admissions of the need for some form of control on the media (McQuail, 1987):

- Media should accept and fulfill certain obligations to society.
- Media can meet these obligations by setting high standards of professionalism, truth, accuracy, and objectivity.
- Media should be self-regulating within the framework of the law.
- Media should avoid disseminating material that might lead to crime, violence, or civil disorder or that might offend minority groups.
- The media as a whole should be pluralistic, reflect the diversity of the culture in which they operate, and give access to various points of view and rights of reply.
- The public has a right to expect high standards of performance, and official intervention can be justified to ensure the public good.
- Media professionals should be accountable to society as well as to their employers and the market.

In rejecting government control of media, social responsibility theory calls for responsible, ethical industry operation; it is practitioners, through the conduct of their duties, who are charged with

operating in a manner that obviates the need for official intrusion. But social responsibility theory does not free audiences from *their* responsibility. We must be sufficiently media literate to develop firm yet reasonable expectations and judgments to better guide the media in meeting their obligations to us.

Media Industry Ethics

A number of formal and informal controls, both external and internal to the industry, are aimed at ensuring that media professionals operate in an ethical manner consistent with social responsibility theory. Among the external formal controls are laws and regulations, codified statements of what can and can't be done and what content is permissible and not permissible, and industry codes of practice. Among the external informal controls are pressure groups, consumers, and advertisers. We have seen how these informal controls operate throughout this text. Our interest here is in examining media's internal controls, or ethics.

Defining Ethics

Ethics are rules of behavior or moral principles that guide our actions in given situations. The word comes from the Greek *ethos*, which means the customs, traditions, or character that guide a particular group or culture. In our discussion, ethics specifically refer to the application of rational thought by media professionals when they are deciding between two or more competing moral choices. "Unlike rules of law," explains media ethicist Patrick **Plaisance (2014)**, "which generally set forth boundaries of our behavior and guide us on what we cannot or should not do, the focus of ethics . . . is more active, or positive: It deals with what we ought to do as moral agents with personal and social obligations" (p. 83).

For example, it is not against the law to publish the name of someone who was raped. But is it ethical? It is not illegal to stick a microphone in a crying father's face as he cradles the broken body of his child at an accident scene. But is it ethical?

The application of media ethics almost always involves finding the *most morally defensible* answer to a problem for which there is no single correct or even best answer. Let's return to the grieving father. The reporter's job is to get the story; the public has a right to know. The man's sorrow is part of that story, but the man has a right to privacy. As a human being, he deserves to be treated with respect and to be allowed to maintain his dignity. The reporter has to decide whether to get the interview or leave the grief-stricken man in peace. That decision is guided by the reporter's ethics.

Balancing Conflicting Interests

In applying ethics, the person making the decisions is the **moral agent**; this person, as ethicist Plaisance explained, has specific personal and social obligations that invariably bring together conflicting interests—for example, those of the editor, readers, advertisers, those being reported on in this chapter's opening vignette.

TRUTH AND HONESTY

Can the media ever be completely honest? As soon as a camera is pointed at one thing, it is ignoring another. As soon as a video editor combines two different images, that editor has imposed his or her definition of the truth. Truth and honesty are overriding concerns for media professionals. But what is truth? Can something be true but not honest? Take two examples from the 2020 Presidential election.

First, Fox News anchor Martha MacCallum, in an effort to discredit the security of mail-in voting, truthfully informed her viewers that in the just-held Michigan primary elections, "they had 864 dead people vote." Yes, 864 "dead people" voted by mail in that election. But an honest account would have noted that those people died *after* they mailed in their ballots, and their votes were subsequently invalidated by Michigan's secretary of state (**Baragona, 2020**).

Then there was NBC News's reporting on Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez placing the name of Senator Bernie Sanders into nomination for her party's Presidential candidacy. NBC truthfully reported, "In one of the shortest speeches of the [Democratic National Convention], Rep. Ocasio-Cortez did not endorse Joe Biden." True, Representative Ocasio-Cortez did not endorse the eventual Democratic nominee at the convention; she had done that weeks before. But an honest account of her appearance would have acknowledged that her sole assigned convention task was to second the nomination of Mr. Sanders, a formality required by convention rules because the senator had earned enough delegates throughout the primaries to be on the convention ballot (**Sullivan, 2020a**).

PRIVACY

Do public figures forfeit their right to privacy? In what circumstances? Are the president's marital problems newsworthy if they do not get in the way of the job? Who is a public figure? When are people's long-ago stints in drug rehab newsworthy? Do you report the names juvenile offenders? What about sex offenders? How far do you go to interview grieving parents? When is secret taping permissible?



It is the truth that at the 2020 Democratic National Convention Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez placed the name of Senator Bernie Sanders in nomination for her party's Presidential candidacy. But some media outlets were less than honest in reporting that truth.

Brian Snyder/UPI/Alamy Stock Photo

Our culture values privacy. We have the right to maintain the privacy of our personal information. We use privacy to control the extent and nature of the interactions we have with others. Privacy protects us

from unwanted government intrusion. The media, however, by their very nature, are intrusive. Privacy proves to be particularly sensitive because it is a metaethic, a fundamental value. Yet the applied ethics of the various media industries allow, in fact sometimes demand, that privacy be denied.

The media have faced a number of very important tests regarding privacy in recent years. Media pursuit of celebrities is one. Celebrities are public figures. They therefore lose some right to privacy. But what about their children? People surely want to know about them. How much privacy are they entitled to? In 2014, the California legislature passed anti-paparazzi legislation designed to make illegal the photography of celebrities' children in a manner that "seriously alarms, annoys, torments, or terrorizes" them. Despite complaints that this law infringed on photographers' First Amendment rights, most objective observers would say that the protection of children is more important than selling a few more magazines.

However, other privacy issues aren't as clear. For example, in the wake of protests across the summer of 2020 following the police killing of George Floyd and shooting of Jacob Blake, video and photojournalists were confronted by the question of demonstrators' privacy. There is no legal question about shielding the identity of people involved in a news event; they are part of the story. Imagine attempting to secure **informed consent**, explaining to a subject why her or his image is being used and what the potential consequences might be, to people fleeing a fuselage of rubber bullets or clouds of tear gas. But what if those images are used, not to further the public interest, but by police to track people down and charge them with crimes or by extremist groups to find them and harass them at home?

"It's not always practical to stop in the middle of a tense situation and chat with a demonstrator," writes journalist Ari **Paul (2020**), "In crisis journalism, photographers are often making split-second decisions, and are also working to protect themselves. If it is not feasible to get consent from everyone pictured, if media can't fully show the faces and bodies in the streets against the police, how else are people to know how historic, enormous, and urgent these protests are? Isn't it in the protesters' interest to visually show their 'people power'?"

Whose interests are served by publishing protesters' images? The photojournalists who need to make a living? The demonstrators putting themselves in harm's way to make a statement? The police charged with maintaining order? The public who has a right to know? As you can imagine, there is more disagreement among media professionals on this issue than there is on photographing celebrities' kids.



There's little disagreement that the children of celebrities should be protected from intrusion into their private lives. Many other privacy issues, however, aren't as clear.

Paul Bradbury/Getty Images

CONFIDENTIALITY

An important tool in contemporary news gathering and reporting is **confidentiality**, the ability of media professionals to keep secret the names of people who provide them with information. Without confidentiality, employees could not report the misdeeds of their employers for fear of being fired; people would not tell what they know of a crime for fear of retribution from the offenders or unwanted police attention. The anonymous informant nicknamed "Deep Throat" would never have felt free to divulge the Nixon White House involvement in the Republican break-in of the Democratic Party's Watergate campaign offices were it not for the promise of confidentiality from *Washington Post* reporters Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward.

But how far should reporters go to protect a source's confidentiality? Should reporters go to jail rather than divulge a name? Every state in the Union, except Wyoming, and the District of Columbia has either a **shield law**, legislation that expressly protects reporters' rights to maintain sources' confidentiality in courts of law, or court precedent upholding that right. There is no shield law in federal courts, and many journalists want it that way. Their fear is that once Congress makes one "media law" it may want to make another. For example, media professionals do not want the government to legislate the definition of "reporter" or "journalist."

The ethics of confidentiality are regularly tested by reporters' frequent use of quotes and information from "unnamed sources," "sources who wish to remain anonymous," and "inside sources." Often the guarantee of anonymity is necessary to get the information, and a large majority of Americans, 82%, agree that there are times when it is appropriate for journalists to use anonymous sources (**Gottfried & Walker, 2020**). But is this fair to those who are commented on by these nameless, faceless newsmakers? Don't these people—even if they are highly placed and powerful themselves—have a right to know their accusers? In 2016 *The New York Times* hoped to provide its reporters with safeguards for the use of anonymous sources that serve as an industry model:

- Special rules apply when the lead of a story—that is, the primary news element—is based entirely on one or more anonymous sources. All such stories must be presented by the department head to one of the paper's top three editors.
- Every other use of anonymous sourcing anywhere in any story must be personally approved in advance by the department head or deputy.
- Direct quotes from anonymous sources will be allowed only in rare instances and with the approval of the department head or deputy.
- At least one top editor must know the specific identity of any anonymous source before publication. (**Sullivan, 2016**)



The Washington Post's Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward (*left, from left to right*) never would have broken the story of the Nixon White House's involvement in the Watergate break-in if it had not been for an anonymous source. The reporters honored their promise of confidentiality for 35 years until "Deep Throat," then-FBI Assistant Director Mark Felt (right), revealed himself in 2005.

(Left): AP Images; (Right): Justin Sullivan/Getty Images News/Getty Images

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

As we've seen, ethical decision making requires a balancing of interests. But what of a media professional's own conflicts of interest? Should they accept speaking fees, consulting contracts, or other compensation from groups that may have a vested interest in issues they may someday have to cover? Consider this situation. In 2020, it was discovered that the *Virginian-Pilot*, having published several unsigned editorials supportive of Dominion Energy, praising the company's projects and attacking its critics, had failed to inform its readers that many of those editorials were authored by a long-time columnist who was a paid speech writer for the energy giant (**Pavior, 2020**).

Likewise, must media organizations disclose any and all possible conflicts of the commentators who appear in their news shows? Consider this situation. When, in 2020, an American drone attack near Iraq's Baghdad airport killed Major General Qassim Suleimani, a powerful Iranian military commander, tensions between Iran and the United States were raised to the point where war was a distinct possibility. Despite national and international debate over the legality of what critics called the general's "assassination," American news outlets featured numerous defenders such as retired Army general Jack Keane, a partner at a venture capital firm that invests in defense contractors, and John Negroponte, vice chair of defense and aerospace lobbying firm McLarty Associates. Neither was

identified as having financial ties to the arms industry, masking the conflict of interest in advocating actions that would benefit their paymasters (Fang, 2020).

And remember reading about video-news releases in Chapter 9? These preproduced reports distributed free of charge to television stations certainly benefit the subject of the report, and the stations using them are well-served, as VNRs provide a convenient source of sometimes interesting information. But as is often the case, broadcasters use them without attribution.

For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic Amazon provided video and a script mimicking a journalistic investigation offering "a glimpse inside Amazon's fulfillment centers to see just how the company is keeping its employees safe and healthy." But only one of the scores of stations across the country that aired the segment informed viewers that the footage had been produced and provided by Amazon (Soundbites, 2020, p. 2). Free promotion for Amazon in exchange for free content for the station; the broadcasters' obvious conflict of interest goes unacknowledged.

Other conflict-of-interest issues bedevil media professionals. The ongoing military actions across the globe raise the problem of **embedding**, reporters accepting military control over their reporting in exchange for close contact with the troops. The interests in conflict here are objectivity and access—do reporters pay too high a price for their exciting video or touching personal interest stories? Typically more subtle, this **access journalism**—reporters acting deferentially toward news sources in order to ensure continued access—inevitably produces compliant reporters, explains press critic Eric Boehlet, who are "nervous about having their access cut off—about not being called on at briefings, being shut out of press gaggles, having no chance at landing a [subsequent] interview, or landing lucrative book deals" (Boehlet, 2021).

Access journalism offers much more power over journalists than is warranted because, according to *Columbia Journalism Review*'s Ross Barkan (2016), "The best reporting is done on the margins, away from the siren charms of power and prestige." The box titled "Should Journalists Be Activists?" offers a deeper look at the relationship between journalists and those they cover.



USING MEDIA TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Should Journalists Be Activists?

The conventional argument is that if journalists are to make a difference, they should never be activists in service of a social or political goal. Who could disagree with that? We want our journalists to simply report, don't we? The answer to those questions rests in what we mean by "activists" and "make a difference."

Journalist Dan Gillmor (2018) wrote in an open letter to his colleagues, "Your job is not to uncritically 'report' — that is, do stenography and call it journalism — when the people you're covering are deceiving the public. Your job is, in part, to help the public be informed about what powerful people and institutions are doing with our money and in our names." Isn't that activism in service of making a difference?

Wesley Lowery of *The Washington Post* thinks it is. “Even beyond big, long investigations, journalists perform acts of activism every day. Any good journalist is an activist for truth, in favor of transparency, on the behalf of accountability. It is our literal job to *pressure* powerful people and institutions via our questions.” His *Post* colleague, media writer Margaret Sullivan, thinks so, too. “The role of journalism in democratic society: to dig out and present the information that helps citizens hold their elected officials accountable,” she wrote, “What if we framed coverage with this question at the forefront: What journalism best serves the real interests of American citizens?. . . I don’t like to see mainstream reporters acting like partisans—for example, by working on political campaigns. But it’s more than acceptable that they should stand up for civil rights— for press rights, for racial justice, for gender equity and against economic inequality” (2020b).

Do you agree? Should journalists be activists? At a time of unprecedented national debate over racial, gender, and economic inequality, is it time for **movement journalism**, journalism that meets the needs of communities directly affected by injustice (**Vasquez, 2020**)?

Perhaps journalists make their greatest difference when they move others to activism. Was it activism when Thomas Paine’s *Common Sense* helped ignite the American Revolution? What about when muckraking journalists wrote magazine exposés that afflicted the comfortable and comforted the afflicted? Was Frederick Douglass’s *North Star,* advocating equality for all, an activist newspaper? Was *The New York Times*’s publication of the *Pentagon Papers* the work of activism? Before you consider your answers, keep in mind the bedrock belief among good journalists that no one ever became a journalist not to make a difference.

PROFIT AND SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

The media industries are just that—industries. They exist not only to entertain and inform their audiences but also to make a profit for their owners and shareholders. What happens when serving profit conflicts with serving the public?

In 2017, for example, the Walt Disney Company, an important advertiser, barred reporters from the *Los Angeles Times* from press screenings of its movies after the paper published a two-part series on tax breaks Disney had extracted from the city of Anaheim and the company’s influence in local elections. Several publications, including *The New York Times*, said that until the *L.A. Times* was reinstated, they would boycott the screenings, denying Disney films prerelease publicity. Journalists belonging to the Los Angeles Film Critics Association, the New York Film Critics Circle, the Boston Society of Film Critics, and the National Society of Film Critics voted to disqualify Disney’s movies from year-end award consideration. In the face of this media solidarity, Disney quickly lifted the ban (Ember & Barnes, 2018).

The *Times* was at the center of another profit/social responsibility conflict, but this time on the wrong side of the issue. According to a staff member, the Pac-12 collegiate sports conference, seeking ways to “identify positive voices,” was looking for a news outlet it could “pay to write positive stories.” To

accomplish this ethically dubious goal, the Pac-12 found the *Times*, promising to "steer $100,000 in advertising to the newspaper in exchange for an expansion in conference coverage." An internal revolt by the paper's journalists, coupled with public revelation of the arrangement, led the paper to cancel the deal 4 months into the arrangement (**Canzano, 2020**).

Balancing profit and social responsibility is a concern not just for journalists. Practitioners in entertainment, advertising, and public relations often face this dilemma. Does an ad agency accept as a client the manufacturer of sugared children's cereals even though doctors and dentists consider these products unhealthy? Does a public relations firm accept as a client the trade office of a country that forces prison inmates to manufacture products in violation of international law? Does a syndication company distribute the 1950s television series *The Amos 'n' Andy Show* knowing that it embodies many offensive stereotypes of African Americans?

Moreover, balancing profit and the public interest does not always involve big companies and millions of dollars. Often, a media practitioner will face an ethical dilemma at a very personal level. What would you do in this situation? The editor at the magazine where you work has ordered you to write an article about the 14-year-old daughter of your city's mayor. The girl's addiction to amphetamines is a closely guarded family secret, but it has been leaked to your publication. You believe that this child is not a public figure. Your boss disagrees, and the boss *is* the boss. By the way, you've just put a down payment on a lovely condo, and you need to make only two more installments to pay off your car. Do you write the story?

OFFENSIVE CONTENT

Entertainment, news, and advertising professionals must often make decisions about the offensive nature of content. Other than the particular situation of broadcasters discussed earlier in this chapter, this is an ethical rather than a legal issue.

Offensive content is protected. Logically, we do not need the First Amendment to protect sweet and pretty expression. Freedom of speech and freedom of the press exist expressly to allow the dissemination of material that *will* offend. But what is offensive? Clearly, what is offensive to one person may be quite satisfactory to another. Religious leaders on the political right have attacked the cartoon show *SpongeBob SquarePants* for supposedly promoting homosexuality, and critics from the political left have attacked just about every classic Disney cartoon for racial and gender stereotyping. Television stations and networks regularly bleep cusswords that are common on cable television and in the schoolyard but leave untouched images of stabbings, beatings, and shootings. Where do we draw the line? Do we consider the tastes of the audience? Which members of the audience—the most easily offended? These are ethical, not legal, determinations.



To some, the friendship between SpongeBob and Patrick is offensive, crossing a moral line. Others might disagree. Where you draw the line on offensive content is an ethical, not a legal, issue.

Paramount/Courtesy of Everett Collection

Codes of Ethics and Self-Regulation

To aid practitioners in their moral reasoning, all major groups of media professionals have established formal codes or standards of ethical behavior. Among these are the Society of Professional Journalists's *Code of Ethics*, the American Society of News Editors's *Statement of Principles*, the Radio–Television Digital News Association's *Code of Broadcast News Ethics*, the American Advertising Federation's *Advertising Principles of American Business*, and the Public Relations Society of America's *Code of Professional Standards for the Practice of Public Relations.*

These are prescriptive codes that tell media practitioners what they should do. For example, the Society of Professional Journalists in 2014 approved a new *Code of Ethics*. Its preamble reads,

“Members of the Society of Professional Journalists believe that public enlightenment is the forerunner of justice and the foundation of democracy. Ethical journalism strives to ensure the free exchange of information that is accurate, fair, and thorough. An ethical journalist acts with integrity.”

To some, these codes are a necessary part of a true profession. They offer at least two important benefits to ethical media practitioners: They are an additional source of information to be considered when making moral judgments, and they represent a particular media industry’s best expression of its shared wisdom. To others, they are unenforceable collections of clichés that do little more than ward off more meaningful oversight. Ethicists Jay **Black and Ralph Barney (1985)** argue, “It is indeed not difficult to find examples of codified professional ethics that ultimately become self-serving. That is, they tend to protect the industry, or elements of the industry, at the expense of individuals and other institutions, even of the full society” (pp. 28–29).

In addition to industry professional codes, many media organizations have formulated their own institutional policies for conduct. In the case of the broadcast networks, these are enforced by **Standards and Practices Departments**. Local broadcasters have what are called **policy books**. Newspapers and magazines standardize behavior in two ways: through **operating policies** (which spell out standards for everyday operations) and **editorial policies** (which identify company positions on specific issues).

A declining number of media organizations also utilize an **ombudsperson**, practitioners internal to the company who serve as “judges” in disputes between the public and the organization. Sometimes they have titles such as public editor or reader advocate. *The Washington Post*, which eliminated its ombudsperson in 2013, now uses a **readers’ representative**, who regularly responds to outside criticism. Despite data indicating that having an ombudsperson fosters increased credibility among readers and audiences, as of 2017, after *The New York Times* eliminated its public editor, the only major US media outlet with such a full-time position is NPR, although government-owned but independent US military newspaper *Stars and Stripes* also maintains the position.

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Introduction to Chapter 12

About This Chapter

As much as experts, commentators, and textbook authors like to talk about the death of traditional media, television is still the most powerful entertainment medium in the country (and the world). Television design was being pursued before 1900, and practical television technology was first debuted over 80 years ago. This is a mature medium with a long and poorly understood history. The upcoming chapter does an admirable job of familiarizing you with that history, so this introduction has relatively little work to do supplementing what you're about to read. Before you proceed to the chapter proper, however, we'll need to talk for a bit about a teenaged genius from Idaho and a yacht-sailing innovator from Atlanta.

WHAT TO FOCUS ON

Focus on the information in this introduction. In the upcoming chapter, pay attention to "A Short History of Television." After that, just focus on the sections of the chapter that contain the key words, important people, and answers to questions that are listed at the end of this introduction.

Introductory Information About Television

Focus on Critical Thinking: Who Invented Television?

So, who invented the television? By now you should know what kind of a mess you're getting yourself into by even asking that kind of question. The truth, of course, is that television is a complicated system that involves multiple devices working together to record moving images and sound, to transmit them across great distances, and then to reassemble and present them in a smooth and convincing fashion for consumption by eager consumers. Furthermore, the nature of scientific and technical advancement involves multiple individuals being inspired by the work of others, making small advancements that then allow the next group of people to innovate. The upcoming chapter does a good job explaining the many steps that led to the creation of what we now think of as television, but there is one chapter that deserves a bit more attention.

It's hard to say who first came up with the *idea* of television. The answer depends largely on how you define television. However, it is definitely true that by the 1870s scientists were thinking about how to transmit images electronically at a distance. During the early 1900s, there was something of an international race to invent and then build a practical, workable television system. Many early efforts involved extensive use of mechanical equipment: machines with moving parts. These systems produced positive scientific results, but none of them seemed capable of forming the basis for a reliable commercial product. **Enter Philo T. Farnsworth**. His story is truly amazing. Philo reportedly decided he would become an inventor when he was six years old, living with his family in Utah. When he was twelve, his family moved to a ranch house in Idaho that belonged to his uncle. Philo discovered a stack of science and technology magazines in the attic of the old house, and began reading and experimenting. He started winning prizes with his electronic inventions, and when he was 14 he came up with what proved to be a revolutionary idea. "Farnsworth drew it out on the blackboard for his high school science teacher, Justin Tolman: plans for a wholly electronic television. Images would be captured and conveyed by electron beams between cathode ray tubes."[1] By 1927, at the age of twenty-one, Philo had sent his first successful transmission. In 1928, he demonstrated the system to the press. By 1930, Philo's financial backers were trying to tempt RCA to invest in his work and possibly buy out Farnsworth's company. RCA sent their primary television scientist **Vladimir Zworykin** to visit Philo's lab. And that's where things get complicated.

Some accounts describe Philo Farnsworth as the sole inventor of television. Others credit Zworykin, or even John Logie Baird. The upcoming chapter claims that historians disagree on what really happened, but that's not entirely accurate. There is broad agreement that Zworykin was a prodigious and important inventor who had made enormous advances in television receiver technology. However, he had not been successful in creating a fully electronic television system like the one Farnsworth had invented. Zworykin was particularly interested in Farnsworth's "image dissector"—his camera technology—but the young American rejected RCA's offer of $100,000 for his work. This reportedly upset **David Sarnoff**, then head of RCA, and the company began a legal fight to invalidate Farnsworth's patents and claim control of his invention. In 1935, the U.S. Patent Office recognized the primacy of Philo's claims, and in 1939 RCA agreed to pay Farnsworth for his patents. Philo went on to be a productive inventor, creating many inventions that are still in use in some way

today. However, RCA won the war for the television, and was able to claim control of the early marketplace while Philo's companies were not nearly as successful. Many individuals would end up contributing to the array of technologies that made up modern television, but none of their stories were quite so compelling or unusual as that of Philo Farnsworth, an American teenager from Idaho who conceived of electronic television while still in high school.

So, who invented television again? The answer is not any of the individuals I have just mentioned. The technology was dreamed up by many different inventors, inspired by previous inventions like the telegraph and the radio. Television is a complicated system more than a single technology, and different aspects of that system were invented by various people working separately, together, and in competition. Each person's innovations were built on previous technologies. The fact that we assign ownership of inventions to individuals and corporations for legal and financial purposes tends to obscure the fact that so many different people contributed to the development of television. As a critical consumer of media, remember that there is a difference—and often a very large difference—between the true story and the story that wins the day legally or financially.

Ted Turner

In 1969, Atlanta businessman and sailing enthusiast **Ted Turner** bought a failing local television station, quickly returning it to profitability. In 1973, he purchased the rights to air the Atlanta Braves games. This turned out to be a questionable decision because the Braves were not very competitive. Fearing that his station would lose lucrative programming, Turner also bought the Braves franchise in 1976. At the same time, Turner was acquiring a large library of films to show on his station, and was making money by playing infomercials. WTCG (Turner's station) took a percentage of each item sold through those commercials, so he was eager to expand the range of his station.[2] He had already started marketing his station to cities near Atlanta, and by 1976 up to 150 cable systems were carrying Turner stations. When Turner's friends and business contacts explained to him that HBO was about to start using satellites to reach an entire national network of cable systems, Turner was intrigued. He began trying to get into the satellite television game, but confronted a number of technical and legal challenges. In December of 1976, he finally cleared all the hurdles and began broadcasting his newly renamed "**Superstation**" via satellite. This made Ted Turner the owner of the first "**standard cable**" station in the country—meaning that every cable system had access to his station, but (unlike HBO) Turner did not charge consumers for the privilege of accessing it. In 1979, he changed the name of the station again, this time to WTBS, for Turner Broadcasting Systems. By that time, the superstation was on 1,710 systems serving 7.2 million subscribers."[3] Turner would go on to found CNN, TNT, the Cartoon Network, and Adult Swim, as well as other channels, but it was arguably his first national foray into cable television that was the most influential of his many accomplishments.

What to Study

KEY WORDS

Superstation

Standard cable

Nipkow disc

Iconoscope tubey

Kinescope

Spot commercial sales

I Love Lucy

GTAM meter

C3 rating

Long-tail viewing

CATV

Syndication

Sterling Manhattan Cable

Home Box Office

Multiple System Operators

Time-shifting

Zipping

IMPORTANT PEOPLE

Philo Farnsworth

Vladimir Zworykin

David Sarnoff

Ted Turner

Paul Nipkow

John Logie Baird

Lucille Ball

John Walson

QUESTIONS YOU SHOULD BE ABLE TO ANSWER

- Who invented television? What were the contributions of Philo Farnsworth?
- Roughly what percentage of all consumer Internet traffic is made up by online video?
- Who created the first standard cable station in the country, and what was his motivation for doing so?
- When was the first truly public demonstration of television? What company and network were involved? When were the first FCC television licenses granted?
- By 1952, how many homes had televisions? By the end of the 1950s, what percentage of US households had televisions? What percentage of all US homes have televisions right now?
- What were the quiz show scandals, and how did they impact television?
- In what ways was *I Love Lucy* influential, and why?
- Who first created cable television? Where was it, and what circumstances prompted the innovation?
- Roughly how many households in the US have cable today? How much does the cable industry earn annually?
- How much TV does the average American watch per week? How does TV consumption compare to other mediums? How much advertising revenue does TV generate per year?
- What year did Sesame Street premiere on television? What does academic research say about its impact on children?
- In what year did cable's share of the prime-time audience exceed that of the big four broadcast networks?
- What are the top two pay TV services? How does their number of subscribers compare to the number of people who subscribe to the number three service?
- When did the VCR arrive? What about the DVD? What percentage of American households have a DVD player, and what is the trend in DVD player ownership?

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Television, Cable, and Mobile Video

12



YouTube cult favorite, *Hot Ones: The Game Show*, where contestants challenge celebrities to see who can eat the hottest sauces, made the jump from Web to cable television.

Daniel DeSlover/ZUMA Wire/Alamy Stock Photo



"WHAT'S WITH THE CAMERA AND LIGHTS? YOUR PHONE'S NOT GOOD ENOUGH FOR MAKING VIDEOS ANYMORE?"

"Not for what I'm doing. I'm going to be a TV star."

"A TV star?"

"Well, first a YouTube star, then a TV star, and maybe then the movies, like Roman Atwood."

"Who?"

"Roman Atwood. He has more than 15 million subscribers to his YouTube pranks channel." "Wait, is this the guy who tricked his girlfriend into thinking that one of their kids was killed in an accident? That's some prank."

“For real. It got him a movie deal from Lionsgate. And I bet you never heard of Ryan Kaji either. He’s 8 years old and he makes over $26 million a year showing off toys for his 23 million YouTube subscribers. He now has a show on Nickelodeon. You ever watch *Hot Ones: The Game Show*?”

“Where celebrities embarrass themselves eating super-hot wings and things?”

“Right. Started on YouTube, became a cult favorite, now it’s on cable’s TruTV. Me? I’m using YouTube’s Creator Hub to help me get started and make my mark. YouTube even has YouTube Spaces where people like me can go to produce their shows and maybe even get funding for good ideas. Then they help you get bigger. They have an originals division that connects its stars with big-time movie and TV producers.”

“OK. So what are you going to do for your show? I imagine those folks who made it had some sort of idea, right?”

“I haven’t figured that out yet. But I have a camera and lights. Action’s sure to follow!”

Our aspiring star doesn’t even have to work this hard to make the big time. Being “interesting” on social media may be enough, as casting agents “trawl through Instagram around the clock for people who pique their curiosity” (**Marsh, 2018**). Regardless of whether our wannabe will ever benefit from all this activity, there is indeed massive change roiling contemporary television and video. Social networking sites now produce original video: Face-book spends $2 billion a year on original programming for Facebook Watch; Instagram launched a video service, IGTV; and Snapchat has Snap Originals.



▾ Amazon Prime’s streaming hit *Fleabag* won television’s Emmy Award for Outstanding Comedy Series in 2019.

TCD/Prod.DB/Alamy Stock Photo

On the subscription streaming TV side of this new video environment, Netflix now spends upwards of $15 billion a year on original programming and is likely to boost that to $26 billion in 2028 (**“Netflix Projected,” 2020**). Online retailer Amazon spends over $7 billion a year on original content for Amazon Prime. Its *Fleabag* won the 2019 Emmy for Outstanding Comedy Series a year after its *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* won 2018’s. Hulu Plus streams existing and original shows such as *The Handmaid’s Tale*, which in 2017 became the first streaming series to win the Emmy for Outstanding Drama series. Department store Walmart has a video streaming channel, Vudu, as do old-line broadcast networks CBS (Par-

amount+) and NBC (Peacock), offering programs, such as *Star Trek: Discovery*, *The Good Fight*, and *Brave New World* that are unavailable to their broadcast and cable audiences.

Viewers have enthusiastically taken to this new form of television—streaming accounts for one-fifth of all US television watching (**Ha, 2020**). In fact, during 2020's COVID-19 lock-down, global demand was such that governments around the world asked the major streaming companies to reduce the quality of their video to preserve Internet **bandwidth**, a channel's information-carrying capacity, for other use (**"The Quarantine," 2020**).

Yes, television is changing, and this chapter details that change, from early experiments with mechanical scanning to the electronic marvel that sits in our homes to the mobile screens we carry in our pockets. We trace the rapid transformation of television into a mature medium after World War II and examine how the medium, the entire television industry in fact, was altered by the emergence and success of cable television. And significant change is once again remaking what we currently know as television . . . and what we once knew as the audience. We are all now TV executives, choosing *our* programs and *our* schedules, no longer limited by what some distant network television executives think is the schedule that best serves their advertisers' needs.

The remarkable reach of television—in all its forms—accounts for its attractiveness as an advertising medium. We discuss this reach, and we explore the structure, programming, and economics of the television and cable industries. We consider new technologies, their convergence with television, and how they promise to change the interaction between the medium and its audiences. Finally, we discuss media literacy in terms of the role of satirical television news in the cultural forum.

A Short History of Television

Television has changed the way teachers teach, governments govern, and religious leaders lead, and shaped how we organize the furniture in our homes. Television has changed the nature, operation, and relationship to their audiences of books, magazines, movies, and radio. Television even shapes how we think of the Internet. Will the Web's potential drown in television-level hypercommercialism? Do online news services deliver faster, better, and more accurate information than television? Even the computer screens we use look like television screens; we participate in online video conferencing, play new and improved online video games, and of course, stream hours and hours of video. Already the majority of all traffic that crosses the Internet, by 2022, online video will make up more than 82% of all consumer Internet traffic, 15 times higher than it was in 2017 (**Cisco, 2020**). Before we delve deeper into the nature of this powerful medium and its relationship with its audience, let's examine how television developed as it did.

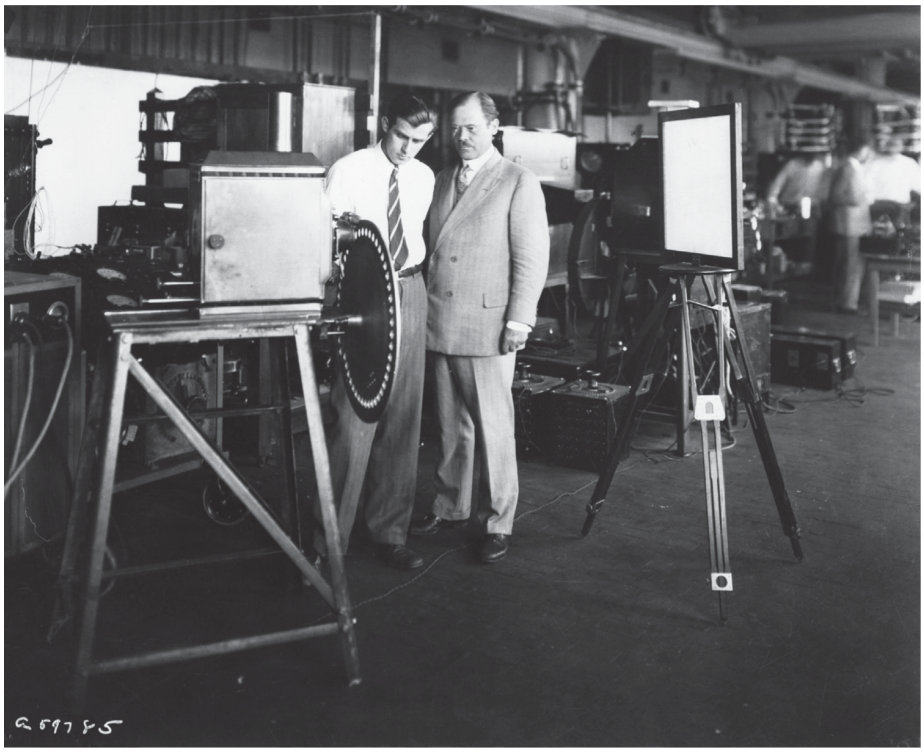
Mechanical and Electronic Scanning

In 1884, Paul Nipkow, a Russian scientist living in Berlin, developed the first workable device for generating electrical signals suitable for the transmission of a scene that people could see. His **Nipkow disc** consisted of a rotating scanning disc spinning in front of a photoelectric cell. It produced 4,000 **pixels** (picture dots) per second, producing a picture composed of 18 parallel lines. Although his mechanical system proved too limiting, Nipkow demonstrated the possibility of using a scanning system to divide a scene into an orderly pattern of transmittable picture elements that could be recomposed as a visual image. British inventor John Logie Baird was able to transmit moving images using a mechanical disc as early as 1925, and in 1928 he successfully sent a television picture from London to Hartsdale, New York.

Electronic scanning came either from another Russian or from a US farm boy; historians disagree. Vladimir Zworykin, a Russian immigrant living near Pittsburgh and working for Westinghouse, demonstrated his **iconoscope tube**, the first practical television camera tube, in 1923. In 1929, David Sarnoff lured him to RCA to head its electronics research lab, and it was there that Zworykin developed the **kinescope**, an improved picture tube. At the same time, young Philo Farnsworth had moved from Idaho to San Francisco to perfect an electronic television system, the design for which he had shown his high school science teacher when he was 15 years old. In 1927, at the age of 20, he made his first public demonstration—film clips of a prize fight, movie scenes, and other graphic images. The "Boy Wonder" and Zworykin's RCA spent the next decade fighting fierce patent battles in court. In 1939, RCA capitulated, agreeing to pay Farnsworth royalties for the use of his patents.

In April of that year, at the World's Fair in New York, RCA made the first true public demonstration of television in the form of regularly scheduled 2-hour NBC broadcasts. These black-and-white telecasts consisted of cooking demonstrations, singers, jugglers, comedians, puppets—just about anything that could fit in a hot, brightly lit studio and demonstrate motion. People could buy television sets at the RCA Pavilion at prices ranging from $200 for the 5-inch screen to $600 for the deluxe 12-inch-screen model. The FCC granted construction permits to the first two commercial stations in

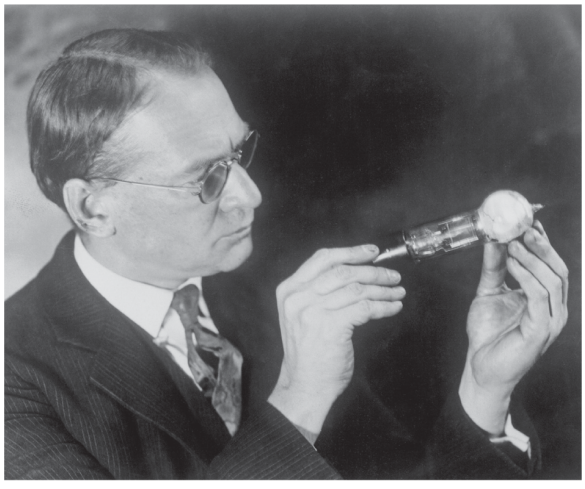
1941, and then World War II intervened. But as was the case with radio during World War I, technical development and improvement of the new medium continued.



A Nipkow disc.

Bettmann/Getty Images





Philo Farnsworth and Vladimir Zworykin, pioneers in the development of television.

(both): Bettmann/Getty Images

The 1950s

In 1952, 108 stations were broadcasting to 17 million television homes. By the end of the decade, there were 559 stations, and nearly 90% of US households had televisions. In the 1950s, more television sets were sold in the United States (70 million) than there were children born (40.5 million) (**Kuralt, 1977**). The technical standards were fixed, stations proliferated and flourished, the public tuned in, and advertisers were enthusiastic. The content and character of the medium were set in this decade as well:

- Carried over from the radio networks, television genres included variety shows, situation comedies, dramas (including Westerns and cop shows), soap operas, and quiz shows.
- Two new formats appeared: feature films and talk shows. Talk shows were instrumental in introducing radio personalities to the television audience, which could see its favorites for the first time.
- Television news and documentary remade broadcast journalism as a powerful force in its own right, led by CBS's Edward R. Murrow (*See It Now*, 1951) and NBC's David Brinkley and Chet Huntley. Huntley and Brinkley's 1956 coverage of the major political conventions gave audiences an early glimpse of the power of television to cover news and history in the making. This was reinforced over the next two decades by the medium's nation-galvanizing coverage of the assassination and funeral of President John F. Kennedy in 1963 and the 1973 Senate Watergate hearings, as well as by the journalism of CBS's Walter Cronkite throughout that time.
- AT&T completed its national **coaxial cable** and **microwave relay** network for the distribution of television programming in the summer of 1951. The entire United States was now within the reach of the major television networks, and they came to dominate the medium.

Four other events from the 1950s would permanently shape, even today, how television operates: the quiz show scandal, the appearance of *I Love Lucy*, McCarthyism, and the establishment of the ratings system. Another, in 1948, would permanently *reshape* the television industry. That development, as you'll soon see, was cable television.

THE QUIZ SHOW SCANDAL AND CHANGES IN SPONSORSHIP

Throughout the 1950s, the networks served primarily as time brokers, offering airtime and distribution (their affiliates) and accepting payment for access to both. Except for their own news and sports coverage, the networks relied on outside agencies to provide programs. An advertising agency, for example, would hire a production company to produce a program for its client. That client would then be the show's sponsor—*The Kraft Television Theatre* and *Westinghouse Studio One* are two examples. The agency would then pay a network to air the program over its national collection of stations. This system had enriched the networks during the heyday of radio, and they saw no reason to change.

But in 1959, a quiz show scandal (enveloping independently produced, single-advertiser-sponsored programs) changed the way the networks did business. When it was discovered that popular shows like *The $64,000 Question* had been fixed by advertisers and producers to ensure desired outcomes, the networks, mindful of their reputations, were determined to take control of their schedules. They, themselves, began commissioning or buying the entertainment fare that filled their broadcast days and nights. Now, rather than selling blocks of time to ad agencies and sponsors, the networks paid for the content they aired through **spot commercial sales** (selling individual 60-second spots on a given program to a wide variety of advertisers).

As a result, the content of television was altered. Some critics argue that this change to spot sales put an end to the golden age of television. When sponsors agreed to attach their names to programs, *Alcoa Presents* or the *Texaco Star Theater*, for example, they had an incentive to demand high-quality programming. Spot sales, with network salespeople offering small bits of time to a number of different sponsors, reduced the demand for quality. Because individual sponsors were not identified with a given show, they had no stake in how well it was made—only in how many viewers it attracted. Spot sales also reduced the willingness of the networks to try innovative or different types of content. Familiarity and predictability attracted more viewers and, therefore, more advertisers.

There is a counterargument, however. Once the financial well-being of the networks became dependent on the programming they aired, the networks themselves became more concerned with program quality, lifting television from its dull infancy (remembered now as the golden age only by those small, early audiences committed to serious character-driven televised drama). Different historians and critics offer arguments for both views.

I LOVE LUCY AND MORE CHANGES

In 1951, CBS asked Lucille Ball to move her hit radio program, *My Favorite Husband*, to television. Lucy was willing but wanted her real-life husband, Desi Arnaz, to play the part of her on-air spouse. The network refused (some historians say the network objected to the prime-time presentation of an interracial marriage—Desi Arnaz was Cuban—but CBS denies this). But Lucy made additional demands. Television programming at the time was broadcast live: Images were typically captured by three large television cameras, with a director in a booth choosing among the three available images. Lucy wanted her program produced in the same manner—in front of a live audience with three simultaneously running cameras—but these cameras would be *film* cameras. Editors could then review the three sets of film and edit them together to give the best combination of action and reaction shots. Lucy also wanted the production to take place in Hollywood, the nation's film capital, instead of New York, the television center at the time. CBS was uncertain about this departure from how television was typically produced and refused these requests as well.







Running from 1947 until 1958, NBC's *Kraft Television Theatre* aired some of the golden age's most respected live anthology dramas. *Top*, Richard Kiley and Everett Sloane; *left*, Ossie Davis; *right*, Walter Matthau and Nancy Walker.

(all): Courtesy Everett Collection

Lucy and Desi borrowed the necessary money and produced *I Love Lucy* on their own, selling the broadcast rights to CBS. In doing so, the woman now best remembered as "that zany redhead" transformed the business and look of television:

- Filmed reruns were now possible, something that had been impossible with live television, and this, in turn, created the off-network syndication industry.
- The television industry moved from New York, with its stage drama orientation, to Hollywood, with its entertainment film mind-set. More action and more flash came to the screen.

- Weekly series could now be produced relatively quickly and inexpensively. A 39-week series could be completed in 20 or 24 weeks, saving money on actors, crew, equipment, and facilities. In addition, the same stock shots—for example, certain exterior views— could be used in different episodes.



▲ *I Love Lucy* was significant for far more than its comedy. Thanks to Lucille Ball's shrewd business sense, it became the foundation for the huge off-network syndicated television industry.

(TV): Interfoto/History/Alamy Stock Photo; (image on the screen): CBS/ Photofest

MCCARTHYISM: THE GROWING POWER OF TELEVISION

The Red Scare that cowed the movie business also touched television, aided by the publication in 1950 of *Red Channels: The Report of Communist Influence in Radio and Television*, the work of three former FBI agents operating a company called American Business Consultants. Its 200 pages detailed the alleged pro-Communist sympathies of 151 broadcast personalities, including Orson Welles and journalist Howard K. Smith. Advertisers were encouraged to avoid buying time from broadcasters who employed these "Red sympathizers." Like the movie studios, the television industry caved in. The networks employed security checkers to look into people's backgrounds, refused to hire suspect talent, and demanded loyalty oaths from performers. In its infancy, television had taken the safe path. Many gifted artists were denied not only a paycheck but also the opportunity to shape the medium's content.

Ironically, it was this same Red Scare that allowed television to demonstrate its enormous power as a vehicle of democracy and freedom.

Joseph McCarthy, the Republican junior senator from Wisconsin whose tactics gave this era its name, was seen by millions of viewers as his investigation of Reds in the US Army was broadcast by all the networks for 36 days in 1954. Daytime ratings increased 50% (**Sterling & Kittross, 1990**). At the same time, Edward R. Murrow used his *See It Now*, a documentary series broadcast by CBS, to expose the senator's lies and hypocrisy. As a consequence of the two broadcasts, McCarthy was ruined; he was censured by his Senate colleagues and later died a lonely alcoholic's death. Television had given the people eyes and ears—and power—where before they had little. The Army–McCarthy Hearings and Murrow's challenge to McCarthyism are still regarded as two of television's finest moments.



◂ Wisconsin's Republican junior senator, Joseph McCarthy, claimed that the army was rife with Communists, Reds, and "fellow travelers." Network TV coverage of the his erratic behavior helped bring the despot into disrepute.

Everett Collection Historical/Alamy Stock Photo

The Coming of Cable

In 1948 in Mahanoy City, Pennsylvania, appliance sales representative John Walson was having trouble selling televisions. The Pocono Mountains sat between his town and Philadelphia's three new stations; no receivable channels meant no TV sales. But Walson was also a powerline worker, so he convinced his bosses to let him run a wire to his store from a tower he erected on New Boston Mountain. As more and more people became aware of his system, he began wiring the homes of customers who bought his sets. In June of that year, Walson had 727 subscribers for his **community antenna television (CATV)** system (**Chin, 1978**). Although no one calls it CATV anymore, cable television was born.

The cable Walson used was a twin-lead wire, much like the cord that connects a lamp to an outlet. To attract even more subscribers, he had to offer improved picture quality. He accomplished this by using *coaxial cable* and self-manufactured boosters (or amplifiers). Coaxial cable—copper-clad aluminum wire encased in plastic foam insulation, covered by an aluminum outer conductor, and then sheathed in plastic—had more bandwidth than did twin-lead wire. As a result, it allowed more of the original signal to pass and even permitted Walson to carry a greater number of channels.

With expanded bandwidth and new, powerful signal boosters developed by Milton Jerrold Shapp, who would later become Pennsylvania's governor, these systems began experimenting with the **importation of distant signals**, using wires not only to provide improved reception but also to offer a wider variety of programming. They began delivering independent stations from as far away as New York to fill their then-amazing 7 to 10 channels. By 1962, 800 systems were providing cable television to more than 850,000 homes.

The industry today is composed of over 5,000 individual cable systems delivering video to 51 million households, high-speed Internet to 68 million, and digital telephone to 30 million (Internet & Television Association, 2020).

THE NIELSEN RATINGS

The concept of measuring audience was carried over from radio to television, but the ratings as we know them today are far more sophisticated (see **Chapter 7** for more on ratings). The A. C. Nielsen Company began in 1923 as a product-testing company but soon branched into market research. In 1936, Nielsen started reporting radio ratings and was doing the same for television by 1950.

To produce the ratings today, Nielsen selects 41,000 households, about 100,000 people, thought to be representative of the entire US viewing audience. To record data on what people in those TV households are watching, Nielsen employs the **Global Television Audience Metering (GTAM) meter**, which actively (requiring viewer input) and passively (automatically reading digital codes embedded in video content) measures viewing as people, with increasing mobility, consume video on a growing array of technologies. The data are then sent to Nielsen via the Internet, and the company determines the programs watched, who watched them, and the amount of time each viewer spent with them. But the same convergence that required the development of the GTAM meter is upsetting the business of audience measurement in many ways. In fact, many television and advertising people see the ratings as useless, a relic from an earlier time. "We are piloting interplanetary travel with a tachometer and a speedometer and a steering wheel that only moves 30 degrees in either direction," explains Jonathan Steuer, chief research officer for Omnicom Media Group, "which isn't really helpful" (in Steinberg, 2019, p. 24).

To present a fuller picture of a show's total audience by accounting for multiplatform and **nonlinear TV** viewing (people watching on their own schedules), the four major broadcast networks demanded a new rating that measured a program's true performance. Nielsen responded with several fixes, including its **C3 and C7 ratings**, counting audiences across several screens—TV (original airing plus DVR), Internet, and mobile video. The "3" and the "7" represent the viewing of the commercials (the "C") that appear in a specific program within 3 or 7 days of its premiere telecast. With C7, for example, a program like the Paramount Network's *Yellowstone* enjoys a "lift" of 215%; the viewership of ABC's *Emergence* grows 192% (**"Tops of," 2020**). This is extremely important to the networks as half to three-quarters of all commercial TV viewing is time-shifted (**Lukovitz, 2020a**).



▲ John Walson.

The Barco Library, The Cable Center, Denver, CO.

Facing pressure from competitor ComScore, which can measure viewing across all screens (stationary and mobile) from more than 10 million homes, and heeding broadcasters' demand for more accurate measurement of **long-tail viewing** (TV program viewership over time, across multiple platforms, and on-demand), Nielsen rolled out its Total Content Ratings in 2017. The new measure captures all viewing across all possible devices, including traditional TV; video-on-demand; DVR playback; Internet-connected devices such as Roku, Xbox, and Apple TV; smartphones; desktop computers; laptops; and tablets.

Nonetheless, even after Nielsen announced in 2020 that it would include out-of-home viewing in its measurement, there remains great dissatisfaction with the company's ratings, leading many networks to augment them with their own measure they say better reflects today's video environment, **total viewer impressions**, the actual number of people watching rather than a percentage of possible viewers who tune in, counting all the ways a show is consumed: long-tail viewing, out-of-home, broadcasters' own websites, posted to social media, re-shown on YouTube, and so on. NBCUniversal, Hearst, and several other major station groups and networks have moved to the new measure. Some networks have gone as far as to drop Nielsen altogether, most notably cable channel CNBC. Still, as it has been from the earliest days of television, "the Nielsens" remain the *coin of the realm*, that is, they are, despite their limitations, the agreed-upon currency on which the vast majority of television advertising sales are based.

Another important measure of television's audience is its **share**, which is a direct reflection of a particular show's competitive performance. Share doesn't measure viewers as a percentage of *all* television households (as do the ratings). Instead, the share measures a program audience as a percentage of the *television sets in use* at the time it airs. It tells us what proportion of the *actual* audience a program attracts, indicating how well a particular program is doing on its given night, in its time slot, and against its competition. For example, game show *Wheel of Fortune* normally gets a rating of around 5—poor by prime-time standards—but because it airs when fewer homes are tuned in, its share of 50 (50% of the homes with sets in use) is quite spectacular. You can see how ratings and shares are computed in **Figure 12.1**.

Ratings and shares can be computed using these formulas:

$$\text{Rating} = \frac{\text{Households tuned in to a given program}}{\text{All households with television}}$$

$$\text{Share} = \frac{\text{Households tuned in to a given program}}{\text{All households tuned in to television at that time}}$$

Here's an example. Your talk show is aired in a market that has 1 million television households; 400,000 are tuned in to you. Therefore,

$$\frac{400{,}000}{1{,}000{,}000} = 0.40, \text{ or a rating of } 40.$$

At the time your show airs, however, there are only 800,000 households using television. Therefore, your share of the available audience is

$$\text{Share} = \frac{400{,}000}{800{,}000} = 0.50, \text{ or a share of } 50.$$

If you can explain why a specific program's share is always higher than its rating, then you understand the difference between the two.

◂ **Figure 12.1** Computing Ratings and Shares.

Television and Its Audiences

The 1960s saw some refinement in the technical structure of television, which influenced its organization and audience. In 1962, Congress passed **all-channel legislation**, which required that all sets imported into or manufactured in the United States be equipped with both VHF and UHF receivers. This had little immediate impact; US viewers were now hooked on the three national networks and their VHF affiliates. Still, UHF independents and educational stations were able to at least attract some semblance of an audience. The UHF independents would have to wait for the coming of cable to give them clout. Now that the educational stations were attracting more viewers, they began to look less educational in the strictest sense of the word and began programming more entertaining cultural fare (see the essay "The Creation of *Sesame Street*"). The Public Broadcasting Act of 1967 united the educational stations into an important network, the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS), which today has 350 member stations.

The 1960s also witnessed the immense social and political power of the new medium to force profound alterations in the country's consciousness and behavior. Particularly influential were the Nixon–Kennedy campaign debates of 1960, broadcasts of the aftermath of Kennedy's assassination and funeral in 1963, the 1969 transmission of Neil Armstrong's walk on the moon, and the use of television at the end of the decade by civil rights and anti–Vietnam War leaders.

> The 1960s also gave rise to a descriptive expression sometimes used today when television is discussed. Speaking to the 1961 convention of the National Association of Broadcasters, John F. Kennedy's new FCC chair, Newton Minow, invited broadcasters to sit down in front of your television set when your station goes on the air and stay there without a book, magazine, newspaper, profit and loss sheet, or ratings book to distract you, and keep your eyes glued to that set until the station signs off. I can assure you that you will observe a **vast wasteland**.



USING MEDIA TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

The Creation of *Sesame Street*

In 1968, a public affairs program producer for Channel 13 in New York City identified a number of related problems that she believed could be addressed by a well-conceived, well-produced television show.

Joan Ganz Cooney saw that 80% of 3- and 4-year-olds and 25% of 5-year-olds in the United States did not attend any form of preschool. Children from financially disadvantaged homes were far less likely to attend pre-school at these ages than their better-off peers. Children in these age groups who did go to preschool received little academic instruction; preschool was the equivalent of organized recess. Large numbers of US children, then, entered first grade with no formal schooling, even though education experts had long argued that pre-school years were crucial in children's intellectual and academic development. In addition, the disparity in academic preparedness between poor and other children was a national disgrace.

What did these children do instead of going to pre-school? Cooney knew that they watched television. But she also knew that "existing shows for 3- through 5-year-old children . . . did not have education as a primary goal" (**Ball & Bogatz, 1970**, p. 2). Her idea was to use an interesting, exciting, visually and aurally stimulating television show as an explicitly educational tool "to promote the intellectual and cultural growth of preschoolers, particularly disadvantaged preschoolers," and to "teach children how to think as well as what to think" (**Cook et al., 1975**, p. 7).

Cooney established a nonprofit organization, the Children's Television Workshop (CTW), and sought funding for her program. Several federal agencies, primarily the Office of Education, a number of private foundations including Carnegie and Ford, and public broadcasters, contributed $13.7 million for CTW's first four years.

After much research into producing a quality children's television show and studying the best instructional methods for teaching preschool audiences (it is the most-researched television show of all time; **Lepore, 2020**), CTW unveiled *Sesame Street* during the 1969 television season. It was an instant hit with children and parents. *The New Republic* said, "Judged by the standards of most other programs for preschoolers, it is imaginative, tasteful, and witty" (cited in **Sedulus, 1970**). Originally scheduled for 1 hour a day during the school week, within months of its debut *Sesame Street* was being programmed twice a day on many public television stations, and many ran the entire week's schedule on Saturdays and Sundays. Today, more than 50 years after its debut, *Sesame Street* airs 35 new episodes a year, and in 2016 it made HBO (including its streaming service) its new home network. Episodes run on HBO for nine months before being aired on free public television.

Did Cooney and her show make a difference? Several national studies demonstrated that academic performance in early grades was directly and strongly correlated with regular viewing of *Sesame Street.* The commercial networks began to introduce educational fare into their Saturday morning schedules. ABC's *Grammar Rock, America Rock* (on US history), and *Multiplication Rock* were critical and educational successes, and much of the programming on today's kids' channels, such as Nickelodeon, trace their pacing and production techniques to the show, winner of 228 Emmy Awards.

And *Sesame Street* continues to make a difference by never shying from topics, difficult as they might be for kids, tackling issues like death, autism, divorce, the trauma of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, and incarceration. During the 2020 coronavirus pandemic, *Sesame Street* even took on the virus, teaming with CNN for *The ABCs of COVID-19* to answer questions for both parents and kids, and with scores of networks and streaming services, for *Sesame Street: Elmo's Playdate,* showing the furry red monster, housebound like millions of other children, teleconferencing with his pals (**Buckman, 2020**).

Whether or not one agrees with Minow's assessment of television, then or now, there is no doubt that audiences continue to watch:

- There are just over 120 million television households in the United States, 96% of all US homes (**Television Advertising Bureau, 2020**).

- The average American adult watches television 27 hours a week (**Epstein, 2020**).
- Television reaches more adults each day than any other medium, and those people spend more time with television than with any other medium. Moreover, it tops all other media in building product awareness, interest, and intention to purchase (**Television Advertising Bureau, 2020**).
- Eighty-eight percent of American adults admit that they have lost sleep because they were binge watching a television series (**Watson, 2020**).

There can be no doubt, either, that television is successful as an advertising medium:

- Total annual billings for television are around $68.2 billion, 27.8% of all US ad spending (**"Total U.S.," 2020**).
- The average 30-second prime-time network television spot cost well over $100,000. A spot on *Sunday Night Football* gets $783,718; spots on *This Is Us* cost $476,352; 30 seconds on *The Voice* run $254,224 (**Poggi, 2020**).
- Prime ad time on the February 2021 Buccaneers–Chiefs Super Bowl broadcast cost $5.6 million for 30 seconds, or approximately $186,666 per second, and that does not include the cost of the commercials' production, typically more than $1 million per spot (**Taylor, 2021**).

Scope and Nature of the Broadcast Television Industry

Today, as it has been from the beginning, the business of broadcast television is dominated by a few centralized production, distribution, and decision-making organizations. These networks link affiliates for the purpose of delivering and selling viewers to advertisers. The large majority of the 1,372 commercial stations in the United States are affiliated with a national broadcasting network. ABC, NBC, CBS, and Fox each have over 200 affiliates, and these traditional outlets remain the four most-viewed television networks across the broadcast and cable dial. About 200 more stations are affiliated with the CW Network, jointly owned by CBS and Warner Bros., and there are two national Spanish-language networks, Telemundo (94 stations) and Univision (61). Although cable has introduced us to dozens of popular cable networks—ESPN, MTV, Comedy Central, and A&E, to name a few—for decades most programs that came to mind when we thought of television were either conceived, approved, funded, produced, or distributed by the broadcast networks. Although, as you read at this chapter's outset, that's quickly changing. More on that soon.

Local affiliates carry network programs (they **clear time**). Until quite recently, affiliates received direct payment for carrying a show, called compensation, and the right to keep all income from the sale of local commercials on that program. But loss of network audience and the rise of cable have altered this arrangement. Now networks receive **reverse compensation**, a fee paid by the local station for the right to be that network's affiliate. It is typically based on the amount of money the local cable operation pays to the station to carry its signal, called **retransmission fees**.

The Networks and Program Content

Networks control what appears on the vast majority of local television stations, but they also control what appears on non-network television, that is, when affiliates program their own content. In addition, they influence what appears on independent stations and on cable channels. This non-network material not only tends to be network-*type* programming but most often is programming that originally aired on the networks themselves (called **off-network** programs).

Why do network and network-type content dominate television? *Availability* is one factor. There is 75 years' worth of already successful network content available for airing on local stations. A second factor is that the *production and distribution* mechanisms that have long served the broadcast networks are well established and serve the newer outlets just as well as they did NBC, CBS, and ABC. The final reason is us, the audience. The formats we are most comfortable with—our television tastes and expectations—have been and continue to be developed on the networks.

How a Program Reaches the Screen, Traditionally and Otherwise

The national broadcast and cable networks look at about 4,000 proposals a year for new television series. Many, if not most, are submitted at the networks' invitation or instigation. Of the 4,000, about

60 to 70 will be filmed as **pilots**, or trial programs, at a cost of $5 million for a 60-minute show and $3 million for a 30-minute show (**Friedman, 2019**). Perhaps 20 to 30 of these will reach our screens. The broadcast and cable networks spend over $500 million a season to suffer this process. For this reason, they prefer to see ideas from producers with established track records and demonstrated financial and organizational stability— for example, Dick Wolf is the source of 9 *Law & Order* and 3 *Chicago* dramas, plus 36 other prime-time series aired in recent years. Jerry Bruckheimer, of the several titles in the *CSI* series, accounts for more than 25 more.

First premium cable and then, even more profoundly, the streaming services have dramatically altered how programs make it to our TV sets. This is largely due to the amount of money they are willing to spend on production (for example, $15 million an episode for HBO Max's *Game of Thrones* and $35.8 million per episode for Amazon Prime's *Lord of the Rings*; **Friedman, 2021**) and the creative freedom they promise.

The way to traditionally get a program on TV differs somewhat for those who have been asked to submit an idea and for producers who bring their concepts to the broadcast and cable networks. First, a producer has an *idea*, or a network has an idea and asks a proven producer to propose a show based on it, possibly offering a *straight-to-series commitment* to keep the show away from a competing channel, as was the case with NBC's *Young Rock* and ABC's *The Big Sky*. An independent producer, however, must *shop* the idea to one of the networks; naturally, an invited or locked-down producer submits the proposal to only one network. In either case, if the network is persuaded, it *buys the option* and asks for a written *outline* in which the original idea is refined. If still interested, the network will order a full *script.*

If the network approves that script, it will order the production of a pilot. Pilots are then subjected to rigorous testing by the networks' own and independent audience research organizations. Based on this research, networks will often demand changes, such as writing out characters who tested poorly or beefing up storylines that test audiences particularly liked.

If the network is still interested—that is, if it believes that the show will be a hit—it orders a set number of episodes and schedules the show. Of course, those with straight-to-series deals suffer no such indignities, as they are ordered in full without requiring a pilot episode. Upsetting the traditional model even more, streaming services have begun to offer successful producers *lockdown deals*, cash upfront to bind them to their platform. For example, Netflix signed *Game of Thrones* creators David Benioff and Dan Weiss to a $200 million multi-year deal to jump from HBO (**Goldberg, 2019**); Amazon made a similar pact with international movie star and lead actor on ABC's *Quantico*, Priyanka Chopra Jonas (**Malkin, 2020**).

The streaming services and premium cable channels invest in expensive programming to better attract paying subscribers and because it has an endless shelf life: their programming knows no "new season"; it's always available, year-after-year, to be discovered by existing and new viewers alike. Additionally, they make their content available for their subscribers all over the world—Netflix is in 190 countries, and HBO is in 50.

However, network television program producers participate in this expensive enterprise for a different reason: they can make large amounts of money in syndication, the sale of their programs to stations on a market-by-market basis. Even though the networks control the process from idea to scheduling and decide how long a show stays in their lineups, producers continue to own the rights to their programs.

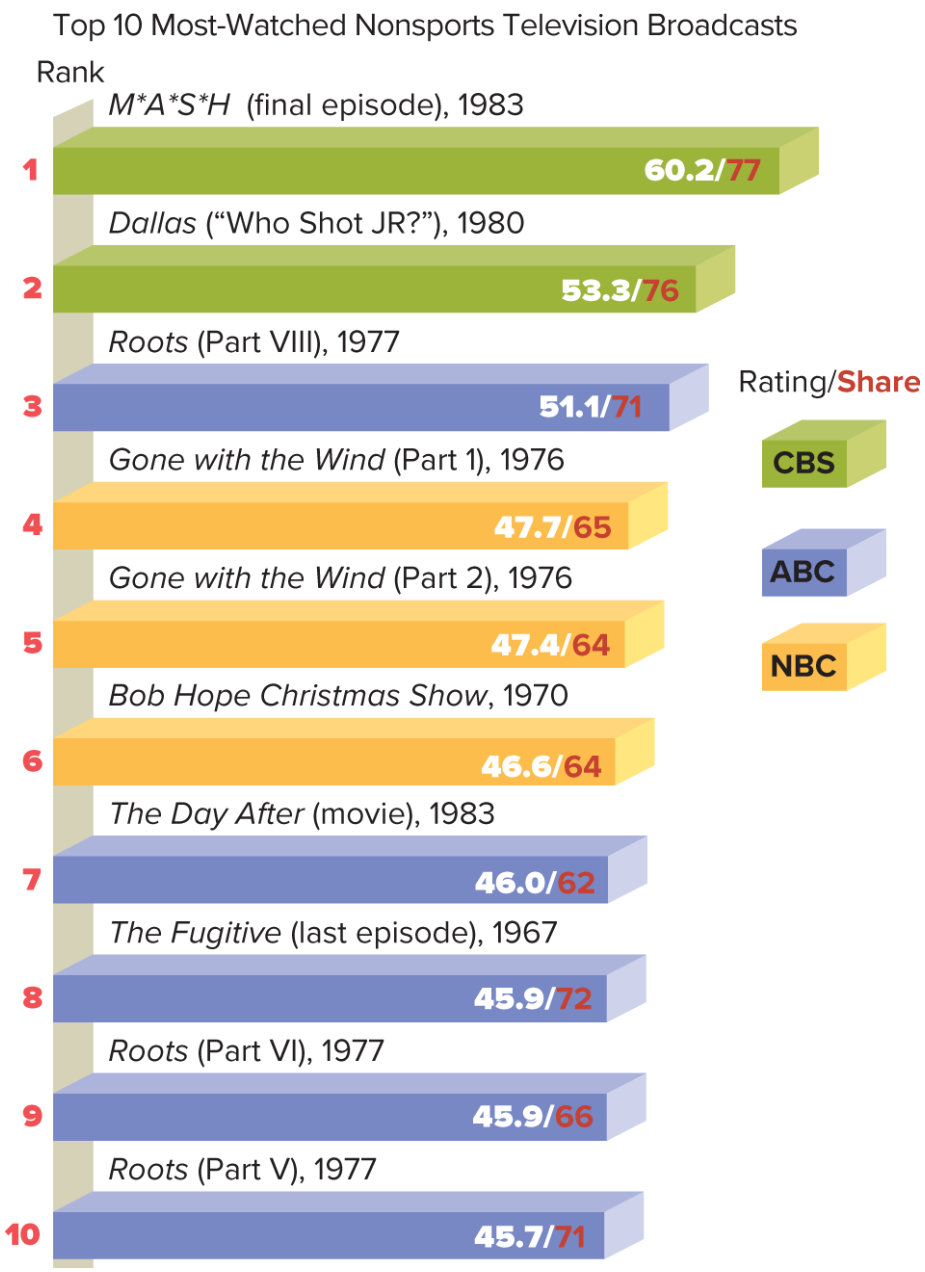
Once enough episodes have been made (generally about 88, which is the product of four years on a network), producers can sell the syndicated package to the highest bidder in each of the 210 US television markets, to the ad-supported cable channels, and overseas, keeping all the revenues for themselves.

This is the legacy of Lucille Ball's business genius (CBS still earns about $15 million a year from *I Love Lucy* syndication). The price of a syndicated program depends on the market size, the level of competition between the stations in the market, and the age and popularity of the program itself. The station buys the right to a specified number of plays, or airings. After that, the rights return to the producer to be sold again and again. A program that has survived at least four years on one of the networks has proven its popularity, has attracted a following, and has accumulated enough individual episodes so that local stations can offer weeks of daily scheduling without too many repeats. In a word, it is a moneymaker. Paramount has already earned more than $2 billion from its syndication of *Frasier*, and Warner Bros. has collected more than $5.8 million an episode from its original syndication of *Friends*, and that does not include income from the series's move to streamer HBO Max and money made from its position as the top-selling DVD television-show collection (Schneider, 2020).

So attractive is syndication's income potential, especially when coupled with the promise of profits from digital downloads, the sale of DVD collections, and pick up by streaming services, that the networks themselves have become their own producers (and therefore syndicators). In fact, the major broadcast networks now produce the vast majority of all the prime-time programming on their own and the top 20 cable networks.

It is important to note that there is another form of syndicated programming. **First-run syndication** is programming produced specifically for sale into syndication on a market-by-market basis. It is attractive to producers because they don't have to run the gauntlet of the network programming process, and they keep 100% of the income. Game and talk shows, long staples of the business, have been joined by court shows, such as *Judge Judy,* distributed daily to hundreds of stations. They are inexpensive to make, inexpensive to distribute, and easily **stripped** (broadcast at the same time five evenings a week). They allow an inexhaustible number of episodes with no repeats and are easy to promote.

Despite the fact that the most-watched programs in history were all aired by the traditional television networks (**Figure 12.2**), the process by which programs now come to our screens clearly has changed. And of course, all this change is the product of the introduction of new technologies—cable, VCR, DVD, digital video recorders, satellite, the Internet and digitization, and smartphones—that have upset the long-standing relationship between medium and audience. Convergence is also reshaping that relationship.



▲ **Figure 12.2** Top 10 Most-Watched Nonsports Television Broadcasts.

Source: ***Television Advertising Bureau, 2020***.





◂ Two of syndication's biggest winners, *Frasier* and *Friends*.

(left) AF archive/Alamy Stock Photo; (right) WARNER BROS/Allstar Picture Library/Alamy Stock Photo

Cable and Satellite Television

John Walson's brainchild reshaped the face of modern television. During cable's infancy, many over-the-air broadcasters saw it as something of a friend. It extended their reach, boosting both audience size and profits. Then, in November 1972, Sterling Manhattan Cable launched a new channel called Home Box Office. Only a handful of homes caught the debut of what we now call HBO, but broadcasters' mild concern over this development turned to outright antagonism toward cable in 1975, when new HBO owner Time Inc. began distributing the movie channel by satellite. Now **premium cable** was eating into the broadcasters' audience by offering high-quality, nationally produced and distributed content. The public enthusiastically embraced cable, which, coupled with the widespread diffusion of **fiber optic** cable (the transmission of signals by light beam over glass, permitting the delivery of hundreds of channels), brought the medium to maturity.

Programming

Cable's share of the prime-time audience exceeded that of the Big Four broadcast networks for the first time in 2002. Its total audience share has exceeded that of ABC, CBS, NBC, and Fox every year since. What attracts these viewers is programming, a fact highlighted by two pieces of recent industry data: cable shows annually garner the large majority of all prime-time Emmy Award nominations (HBO's *Game of Thrones alone* has 738 nominations and 269 wins), and cable viewing exceeds network viewing for every single American age demographic.

As we've seen, cable operators attract viewers through a combination of basic and premium channels, as well as with some programming of local origin. There are more than 900 national and regional cable networks. We all know national networks such as CNN, Lifetime, HBO, and the History Channel. Regional network Spectrum News North Carolina serves the area that gives it its name, and several college and regional sports-oriented channels serving different parts of the country, for example, the Big Ten Network and New England Sports Network. The financial support and targeted audiences for these program providers differ, as does their place on a system's **tiers**, groupings of channels made available to subscribers at varying prices.

BASIC CABLE PROGRAMMING

In recognition of the growing dependence of the public on cable delivery of broadcast service as the spread of cable increased, Congress passed the Cable Television Consumer Protection and Competition Act of 1992. This law requires operators to offer a truly basic service composed of the broadcast stations in their area and their public access channels. Cable operators also offer another form of basic service, **expanded basic cable**, composed primarily of local broadcast stations and services with broad appeal such as TBS, TNT, the USA Network, and Comedy Central. These networks offer a wide array of programming not unlike that found on the traditional, over-the-air broadcast networks. Ad-supported cable networks such as these want to be on cable's basic tiers because sponsors covet those large potential audiences. This is the dispute, for example, at the heart of the NFL Network's frequent battles with many of the nation's cable operators. Most operators want to put the network on a premium tier to attract more subscribers, but NFL Network wants placement on basic cable where more viewers means more ad dollars.



▾ HBO's *Game of Thrones* earned 738 Emmy nominations and 269 wins in its 8 seasons.

PictureLux/The Hollywood Archive/ Alamy Stock Photo

Because of concentration, operators are increasingly choosing to carry a specific basic channel because their owners (who have a financial stake in that channel) insist that they do. **Multiple system operators (MSOs)** are companies that own several cable franchises. For example, Time Warner owns truTV, Comcast owns Syfy and Bravo, and Viacom owns BET. Naturally, these networks are more likely to be carried by systems controlled by the MSOs that own them and are less likely to be carried by other systems.



▴ MSOs want the NFL Network on a premium tier; the NFL is happy to stay on basic cable.

Joe Robbins/Getty Images

The long-standard concept of different pricing for different packages or tiers of channels is frequently under attack by the FCC and some members of Congress. Concerns over viewers' accidental access to unwanted, offensive content and rising cable prices are leading to calls for **à la carte pricing**—that is, paying for cable on a channel-by-channel basis. System operators and programmers are split on the issue. System operators argue that à la carte means a much smaller lineup of programming. For example, if most people are unwilling to pay for CSPAN or a Lithuanian-language channel, it would be impossible for system operators to carry them. But programmers, such as ESPN, which spends over $8.8 billion a year on content (**Sanchez, 2020**), argue that à la carte is fairer to them because they will earn what they are actually worth as operators will not have to "waste" money on CSPAN or a Lithuanian-language channel. As you can read in the essay "Should You Cut the Cord?" this debate has recently lost some steam because of the availability of app-based, streamed skinny bundles of programs.

PREMIUM CABLE

As the FCC lifted restrictions on cable's freedom to import distant signals and to show current movies, HBO grew and was joined by a host of other satellite-delivered pay networks. Today, among the most familiar and popular premium cable networks are HBO, Showtime, Sundance Channel, and Cinemax.

In addition to freedom from regulatory constraint, two important programming discoveries ensured the success of the new premium channels. After television's early experiments with over-the-air **subscription TV** failed, many experts believed people simply would not pay for television. So the first crucial discovery was that viewers would indeed pay for packages of contemporary, popular movies. These movie packages could be sold less expensively than could films bought one at a time, and viewers were willing to be billed on a monthly basis for the whole package rather than pay for each viewing.

The second realization boosting the fortunes of the premium networks was the discovery that viewers not only did not mind repeats (as many did with over-the-air television) but welcomed them as a benefit of paying for the provider's slate of films. Premium channel owners were delighted. Replaying content reduced their programming costs and solved the problem of how to fill all those hours of operation.

Premium services come in two forms: movie channels (HBO, Starz!, and Encore, for example) that offer packages of new and old movies along with big sports and other special events—all available for one monthly fee—and pay-per-view channels, through which viewers choose from a menu of offerings (almost always of very new movies and very big sporting events) and pay a fee for the chosen viewing.

People enjoy premium channels in the home for their ability to present unedited and uninterrupted movies and other content not usually found on broadcast channels—for example, adult fare, championship boxing, ultimate fighting, and wrestling. Increasingly, however, that "content not usually found on broadcast channels" often consists not of movies and sports but of high-quality serial programming—content unencumbered by the need to attract the largest possible audience possessing a specific set of demographics. Premium cable series such as *Game of Thrones*, *I May Destroy You*, *Outcast*, *Westworld*, *Billions*, and *I Am Chi* attract large and loyal followings.

The other dominant multichannel service, first available to the public in 1994, is direct broadcast satellite (DBS), television signals received from a satellite dish. What is on a DBS-supplied screen

differs little from what is on a cable-supplied screen; only the mode of delivery is different. DBS in the United States is dominated by two companies: DirecTV (owned by AT&T) and Dish Network. Look at the list of the 10 largest pay-TV services in Figure 12.3. Note that Dish and DirecTV are among that group. But they, like other MSOs, face the troubling problem of **cord-cutting**, viewers leaving cable and DBS altogether and relying on Internet-only television viewing. In 2020 alone, cable and satellite shed 6 million subscribing households, a decline of 7.3% from 2019, dropping US pay TV penetration to mid-1990 levels (Zara, 2021). Making matters worse, 12% of Americans, 31 million people, have never subscribed to cable, which means they are **cord-nevers** (Tingley, 2019). Much of this decline is attributed to what the industry calls **over-the-top (OTT)** television, delivery of video without the involvement of an MSO, as in "over (avoiding) the set-top box." Because of OTT, the number of **zero-TV homes**, those that simply have no TV set, now accounts for 5% of all US homes ("Is Digital," 2020).

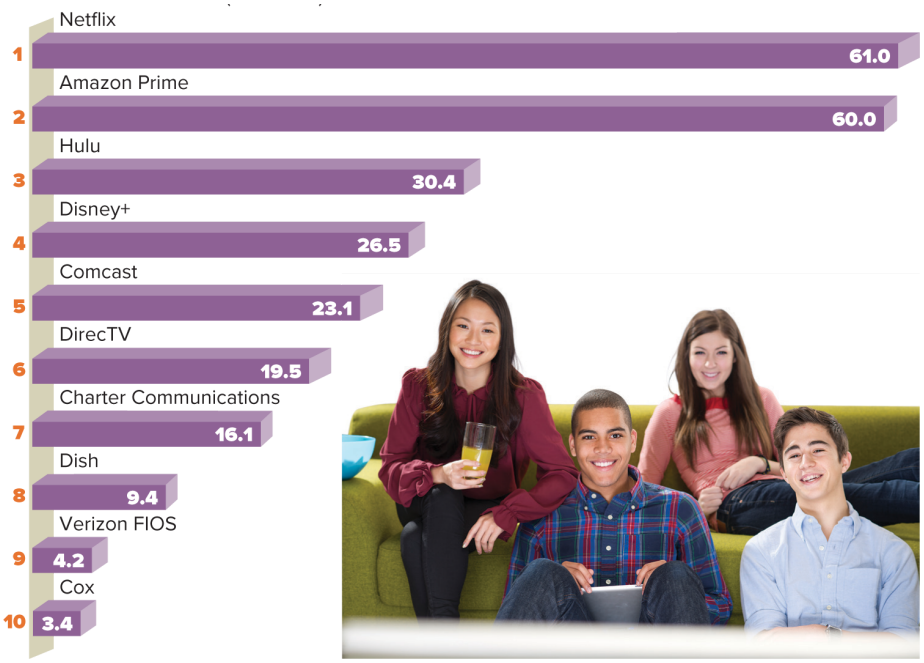


Figure 12.3 Top 10 Pay-TV Services, 2020.

Source: ***Internet & Television Association, 2020****.*
(Photo): sturti/Getty Images

Look again at Figure 12.3. You'll notice that there are four non-MSO services, Netflix, Amazon, Hulu, and Disney+, among the country's top 10 providers of pay television in 2020. They tank 1 through 4, with Netflix and Amazon sitting at 1 and 2 by a very wide margin. In 2019 video streaming subscriptions surpassed cable subscriptions for the first time (Clarke, 2019).

All of these channels—streaming, cable, traditional broadcast—have ushered in the era of **peak TV**, a time of significant viewer choice and high-quality content. The average American household receives 191.8 channels (Mandese, 2020a); there are 1,534 original series offering new episodes now on network, cable, and streaming TV, compared with 882 in 2010 (Steinberg, 2020); the number of "unique program titles" available to an American TV viewer is 646,000, a 10% rise from 2018

(**Mandese, 2020b**); and in 2020, “acknowledging that the volume of eligible programs continues to rise,” the Television Academy announced that it would expand the number of nominees for best drama and best comedy from seven to eight (**Schnieder, 2020a**, p. 23).

Trends and Convergence in Television and Cable

The long-standing relationship between television and its audiences is being redefined. This profound change, initially wrought by cable and satellite, has also been and is being driven by other technologies —VCR, DVD, DVR, the Internet, digitization, and even the smartphone.



▲ Peak TV. We have many choices among a wealth of really fine options. Here are four (clockwise from top left): *Better Call Saul*, *Insecure*, *Stranger Things*, and *This Is Us*. Can you identify the platform on which each originally appeared, network TV, basic cable, premium cable, or streaming?

(top left) Warrick Page/Sony/AMC/Kobal/Shutterstock; (top right) HBO/Kobal/Shutterstock; (bottom left) 20TH CENTURY FOX TV/Album/Alamy Stock Photo; (bottom right) Netflix/Kobal/Shutterstock

VCR

Introduced commercially in 1976, videocassette recorders (VCRs) quickly became common in American homes but were declared dead in 2016 as the last manufacturer, Japan's Funai Electronics, ceased production. In its prime, this technology further eroded the audience for traditional over-the-air television, as people, for the first time, could now watch rented and purchased videos on their own schedules. VCR also introduced the public to **time-shifting**, taping a show for later viewing, and **zipping**, fast-forwarding through taped commercials. As a result, people became comfortable with, and in fact came to expect, more control over when, what, and how they watched television.

DVD

In March 1996, the **digital video disc (DVD)** went on sale in US stores. Using a DVD, viewers can stop images with no loss of fidelity; can subtitle a movie in a number of languages; can search for specific

scenes from an on-screen menu; and can access bonus features that give background on the movie, its production, and its personnel. Scenes and music not used in the theatrical release of a movie are often included on the disc.

Innovations such as these made DVD at the time of its introduction the fastest-growing consumer electronic product of all time. DVD players now sit in a little over half of US homes, down from 80% just a few years ago (**Kunst, 2020**). Because of the many viewing options now available, DVD sales and rentals have fallen dramatically for the last several years. In 2012, the number of online movie transactions (sales and rentals) exceeded the number of DVD sales for the first time, 3.4 billion to 2.4 billion (**Smith, 2012**); and in 2016, video streaming subscription revenues surpassed those from physical disc sales and rentals for the first time (**Richter, 2017**).

Despite its looming obsolescence, DVD served to further alter the relationship between television and its audiences. Viewers became accustomed to having greater control over what they watched, when they watched, and how they watched on a platform much more satisfying than the earlier VCR. In addition, people watching DVDs were viewers that broadcasters could not sell to advertisers, helping to erode television's dominance as an advertising medium.

DVR

In March 1999, Philips Electronics unveiled the **digital video recorder (DVR)**. It contains digital software that puts a significant amount of control over content in viewers' hands. They can "rewind" and play back portions of a program while they are watching and recording it without losing any of that show. By designating their favorite shows, viewers can instruct DVR to automatically record and deliver not only those programs but all similar content over a specified period of time. This application can even be used with the name of a favorite actor. Type in Shemar Moore, and DVR will automatically record all programming in which he appears.

DVR does not deliver programming the way broadcasters, cablecasters, and DBS systems do. Rather, it is employed *in addition to* these content providers. Both DBS providers and almost every MSO now offer low-cost DVR as part of their technology platform, significantly hastening its diffusion into American homes. Today, just over 68 million households have DVR (**Lukovitz, 2019**). Naturally, traditional broadcast and ad-supported cable networks initially found the rapid diffusion of DVR troubling. And while it is true that DVR dramatically changed television viewing as we knew it, it has not had as negative an effect on those traditional programming sources as originally anticipated. While DVR does allow viewers to fast-forward through commercials, we saw earlier in this chapter that traditional broadcasters rely on DVR playback to boost their ratings and therefore profits.

Streaming Video

Television on the Internet was slow to take off because of copyright and piracy concerns, and because few viewers had sufficient bandwidth, space on the wires bringing content into their homes. So for several years, the most typical video fare on the Internet was a variety of short specialty transmissions such as movie trailers, music videos, and news clips. However, the development of increasingly sophisticated video compression software and the parallel rise of homes with **broadband** Internet connections (80% of all US Internet homes have broadband; **Internet & Television Association, 2020**) have changed that. Because broadband offers greater information-carrying capacity (that is, it

increased bandwidth), watching true television on the Internet is now common. Twenty-five percent of all US TV time is spent watching streamers; 78% of Americans subscribe to at least one paid video streaming service, 55% to two or more (**Lukovitz, 2020c**; **Lukovitz, 2020b**). This viewing, as you read earlier, is accomplished OTT.

And as we saw in this chapter's opening, the distinction between Web-only and broad-cast/cable programming is disappearing. Internet video sites Netflix, Hulu, Amazon, and YouTube commission original content, as do social networking sites like Facebook and Instagram. There are, as you read in **Chapter 10**, more than 270 streaming services operating in the United States alone (**Barnes, 2019**), including not only subscription streamers like Hulu, Netflix, and Apple TV+, but ad-supported streamers like Tubi and Pluto TV, and **virtual multichannel video programming distributors (VMVPD)**, services that aggregate live and on-demand television and deliver it over the Internet, for example, Sling and You-Tube Live. This wealth of Internet video is altering viewing habits and is the major factor in the growing number of viewers who are fleeing cable. In fact, you can see in **Figure 12.4** that of all the ways Americans can access video, they see cable and satellite as delivering the least value.

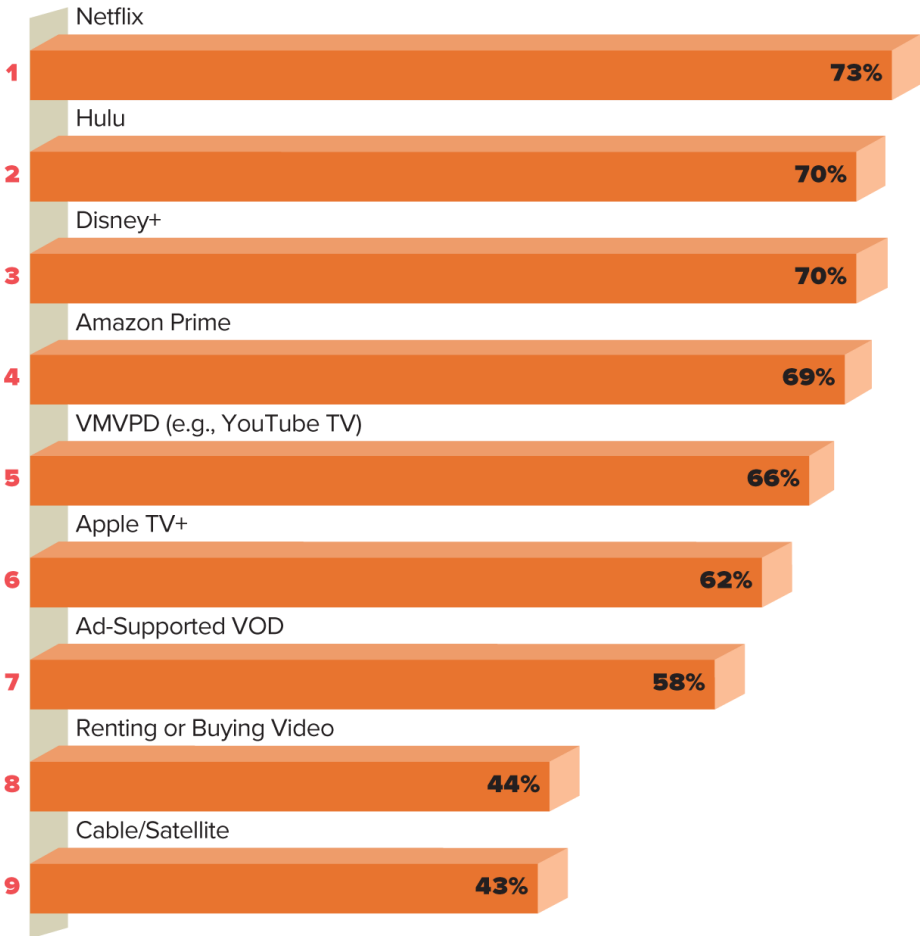


Figure 12.4 Percentage of Americans Who See Good or Excellent Value in a Specific Video Provider.

Source: ***"Users," 2020***.

Smartphones, Tablets, and Social Networking Sites

Smartphones and tablets (and all contemporary handheld video game consoles) have made television watching an anywhere, anytime activity. Watching streamed video on mobile devices is now quite routine. Mobile video consumption is growing at a faster rate than on a desktop or laptop, showing 100% growth year-over-year in time spent watching (**"55 Video," 2020**). This is likely to become even more common as social networking sites increase their commitment to video.

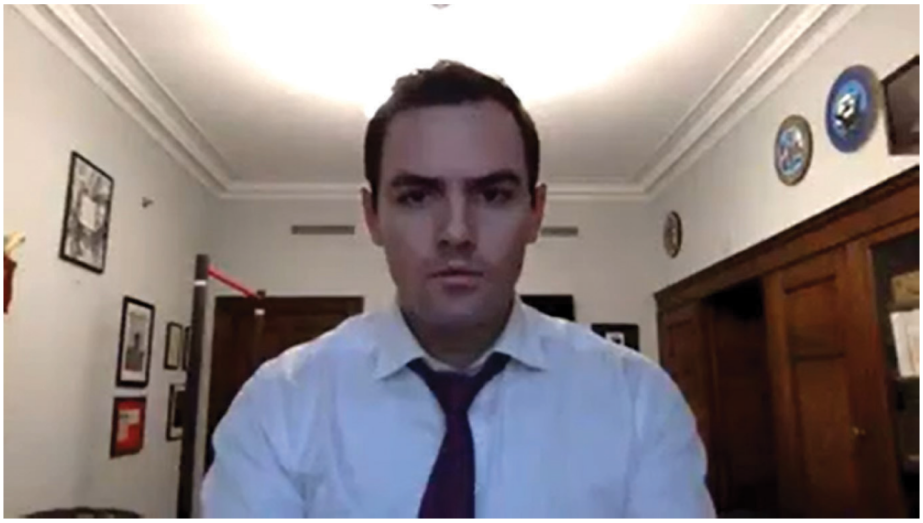
Snapchat, for example, streams daily episodic video programs, Snap Originals, and channels on Instagram's IGTV offer short- and long-form programming. Twitter live streams NBA basketball games. The league has also developed original programming for the site, which also live streams, among other content, NFL football games, Wimbledon tennis matches, CBS News, the NHL, major league baseball, and the Pac-12 Network.



▲ Streaming makes us all rulers of the video kingdom.

Whitehead, Bill/CartoonStock

Additionally, Twitter live streams the Republican and Democratic national conventions. Facebook Live streams major league baseball, professional soccer, and the US men's and women's national basketball teams. In addition, all the major professional sports leagues offer free apps that let mobile users access their content while on the go. There is also original nonsports content on Facebook Watch— for example, horror series, *The Birch*, and mystery *Limetown*.



Wisconsin member of the US House of Representatives, Republican Mike Gallagher, using Periscope, livestreamed his demand that President Trump call off his supporters as they stormed the Capitol in a violent effort to stop the certification of then-President-Elect Biden's electoral win.

Mike Gallagher

There are several apps that encourage not only mobile viewing but mobile broadcasting as well. Facebook Live and Twitter's Periscope let users connect to their social networking accounts and stream live video directly to their followers. These sites, joined by videogame-centric Twitch, were crucial to the success of the summer 2020 Black Lives Matter movement, telecasting ongoing protests from around the globe. "Over the past few weeks, we've seen creators livestreaming content from the protests and engaging their communities in open conversations around race, inequality and how to effect change," said Twitch spokeswoman Brielle Villablanca (in **Browning, 2020**, p. B3). Likewise, in January 2021, when insurrectionists stormed Washington, D.C.'s Capitol Building to stop the certification of Joe Biden election to President, numerous locked-down representatives and senators live streamed their reactions to the attacks to a stunned country and world (**Fenwick, 2021**). Others make more routine use of these technologies—for example, the NASDAQ stock exchange livestreams interviews with financial luminaries and corporate executives and broadcasts the market's opening and closing bells, and retailer Kohl's streams live workouts with its exercise experts.

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Introduction to Chapter 13

About This Chapter

The Internet is probably the most influential mass medium in our lives today, yet very few people know much about what it is and how it came to be. The purpose of this chapter is to remedy this situation. The upcoming chapter does a good job of telling the story of the Internet, with two exceptions. This introduction focuses on providing you with a better and more useful definition of the Internet, and on filling in some of the historical holes in the traditional history of the medium.

WHAT TO FOCUS ON

Focus on the information in this introduction. In the upcoming chapter, pay attention to “A Short History of the Internet.” In “The Internet Today,” focus on “The World Wide Web.” In “Reconceptualizing Life in an Interconnected World,” pay attention to “Virtual Democracy.” Everywhere else, focus on the key terms and people.

Introductory Information About the Internet

What Is the Internet?

The upcoming chapter defines the Internet as "a global network of interconnected computers that communicate freely and share and exchange information," and, elsewhere "a network of networks." Those definitions are not exactly wrong, they're just incomplete, and because we use the word "Internet" so often it's important to dig a little deeper. There are a dizzying number of definitions of the Internet. The one I want to focus on has the virtue of explaining important things about the sprawling digital system we use every day. In 1995, the **Federal Networking Council** (FNC)—a collaborative agency of the U.S. federal government composed of representatives from many different executive agencies—released a formal definition of the **Internet** that had been "developed in consultation with the leadership of the Internet and Intellectual Property Rights (IPR) Communities."[1] Their definition is the one we'll be using this semester:

"Internet" refers to the global information system that—

i. is logically linked together by a globally unique address space based on the Internet Protocol (IP) or its subsequent extensions/follow-ons;

ii. is able to support communications using the Transmission Control Protocol/Internet Protocol (TCP/IP) suite or its subsequent extensions/follow-ons, and/or other IP-compatible protocols; and

iii. provides, uses or makes accessible, either publicly or privately, high level services layered on the communications and related infrastructure described herein.[2]

While this definition seems complex, it's much easier to understand if we break it down into its four component parts.

First, the Internet is a global information system. This part of the definition underlines the international nature of the Internet, pointing out that the Internet is *by definition* not something that belongs to one country or one group of people. This part of the definition also tells us what the internet is for: it is an informational system. These days the Internet gets used for all sorts of things, but the FNC definition is a reminder that the goal of the Internet is to spread information. Furthermore, what the Internet fundamentally does is transmit information, regardless of whether we intend to use that information for entertainment, enlightenment, enlightenment, commerce, or some mixture of many different goals.

Second the Internet is linked together by a globally unique address space. This simply means that all the computers linked to the Internet use the same addressing system. No matter where in the world your computer is and no matter how you connect to the Internet, your computer automatically gets assigned an identifying number based on a carefully determined protocol. This makes it easy for information to "find" your computer. Imagine that every computer on the Internet is a house in a city. The "unique address space" of the Internet means that all those computers are in the same virtual city, and that the city has a logically laid out, easy to understand road system. In other words, the exact

opposite of Atlanta. Your computer's address instantly tells every other computer exactly where your computer is and how to locate it.

Third, communication on the Internet is governed by a series of publicly available protocols. To continue using our metaphor of the Internet as a large city of computers, these protocols govern the rules of the road. For many years, the heart of these protocols is a process known as **packet switching**—breaking data down into small packets which are then routed to their ultimate destination. This process, which was independently invented in the United States and the U.K. in the early 1960s, allows multiple different data streams to use the same route simultaneously. The packets from different kinds of data can be intermixed freely, which prevents individual data streams from having to take turns in order to use the same route. Metaphorically, packet switching prevents data from getting stuck in traffic, and it prevents the streets of the Internet's virtual city from getting backed up by enormous stretch limousines and MARTA buses of data.

Finally, the Internet provides both public and private services to its users. This part of the definition encourages us to see the Internet as more than merely a method for transferring information. The internet also provides high level services, and those services take multiple forms. Some Internet services are public—not necessarily in the sense that they are available for everyone to see, though of course that is sometimes true, but in the sense that "public" refers to the way we interact with the government or the larger communities in which we live. The Internet provides services related to our lives as citizens of the nation, of the state, of various local and dispersed communities. Part of what the Internet unique, however, is that it *also* provides high level private services. Again, not private in the sense that we expect privacy, though of course we often do, but private in the sense of private commerce. The Internet is one of the only "places" where we can connect with the community *and* engage in private business interactions. The Internet allows us to connect just as easily with our government as with the local pizza delivery place. By definition, the Internet facilitates interaction in multiple ways with many different kinds of entities.

Focus on Critical Thinking: The Internet History We Don't Tell

As you read through the upcoming chapter, you will be certain to notice two things. First, there are a lot of people mentioned in the chapter. In many ways, the history of the Internet is the history of a large group of individuals working to solve individual problems. Their collective work gave us the Internet we know today. However, the second thing you are likely to notice is that an overwhelming number of these people are white men. As a critical consumer of media, you have hopefully already learned that media-related technological innovation is usually a complicated thing, and that few major developments in media can be attributed to one or two people. Another important lesson to learn is that when you are told a story about history, and that story contains nothing but characters who all resemble each other, you should be skeptical. The history of science in the U.S. has a strong tendency to highlight white male contributions and overlook the work of women and people of color. It is important to fill in those gaps and provide additional information about the development of the Internet.

The modern computer industry in the global West is defined by a "gendered history of top-down structural discrimination."[3] This happened through the denial of educational and occupational opportunities for women in technological fields, and in some cases (such as post-World-War-II Great Britain) through government policies forcing women out of technology-oriented jobs. Historians

increasingly argue that women's participation in the history of computer science has been obscured by the fact that early histories of computing and the Internet focused on hardware and not programming—and it is in programming that many women made key contributions. Perhaps the best example of this is **Lady Ada Byron Lovelace**—one of the few women mentioned in the upcoming chapter. She met Charles Babbage, widely recognized as the originator of the computer, in 1833. They became lifelong friends. The chapter notes that Lovelace "aided" Babbage with her insights, but she was far more than a muse. She helped Babbage explain his vision to a broader audience, and she was a deep and insightful mathematical thinker in her own right. In the early 1840s, she translated and wrote extensive notes accompanying a translation of an Italian research paper. Those notes reveal that she was one of the first people to understand the implications and potential applications of a practical computing system. "She imagined the impact it could have on the world, teasing out the implications of general-purpose computing to anticipate the transformative power of software."[4]

Another computing pioneer was **Grace Hopper**, who volunteered for the Navy after the outbreak of World War II. She was assigned to work with the first large-scale mechanical calculator. She was one of the first computer programmers, and became the first person to understand and document the importance of writing subroutines. She also developed one of the first efficient software compliers, and went on to be write software for **UNIVAC**, the first stored-program commercial computer. Hopper was also instrumental in the acceptance of **COBOL**, the first widely accepted programming language aimed at a broad audience. Thanks in large part to her advocacy, COBOL "changed the world" and remained popular for more than four decades.[5] ENIAC, the first general-purpose electronic digital computer, was programmed by a group of six women known as **the ENIAC Six**. These women were chosen because they had demonstrated strong mathematical skills doing things like calculating ballistics tables. To program ENIAC, they had to physically climb inside the computer to adjust switches and cables manually, and to search for faulty connections. "A new program had to first be sketched out on paper, then implemented with extreme precision. Setting up a single calculation could take days, and a full program could take weeks."[6] **Elizbeth Feinler** managed the early ARPANET, as well as multiple subsequent networks, and was instrumental in the group that developed multiple key Internet functions. We have her to thank for the top-level naming scheme (.com, .net, .org, and so on). **Dr. Radia Perlman's** algorithms, still in use today, made the Internet's routing system stable. She also contributed key innovations in cybersecurity.

Black people were also historically excluded from education and employment in the computer industry, and were the targets of racist attitudes that falsely associated intelligence and technological skill with whiteness. **Roy Clay, Sr.** is a great example of the kind of challenges faced by Black people who wanted to work in computer science during the early years of the industry. Despite his impressive educational background and great experience, he was denied a job at McDonnell Aircraft in the 1950s and told "we don't hire professional Negroes."[7] He persisted, and finally got a job at McDonnell Douglas, the same company that had turned him down years before. He realized that no one at his new company understood how to operate the computers they had, so he taught himself to write code, and was eventually hired by Lawrence Radiation Laboratory, IBM, and finally Hewlett-Packard. At HP, he became "the guiding force behind the development" of their computer division.[8] HP's owners at the time resisted his proposal that they become major players in the computer sales industry, so Clay left and helped form Tandem Computers and then Compaq. Ultimately, HP bought Compaq for $22 billion, and became one of the leading success stories in the American computing business. Roy Clay was not only "one of the premier visionaries of the Information Revolution,"[9] he was also influential

in developing Silicon Valley into the modern center for computing and Internet business. He helped bring more Black people, to the area, and became the first person of color to serve on the Palo Alto City Council. He is often referred to as "The Godfather of Silicon Valley." **Dr. Gladys West** was one of the Black women hired by the Air Force to do complex computations before the arrival of electronic computers. She went on to write the programs that allowed the creation of GPS systems. **Dr. Clarence Ellis** was the first Black person to earn a Ph.D. in computer science. He helped develop the icon-based Graphical User Interface that we still use to operate our computers, phones, and other devices. He also led the team that invented real-time document collaboration. **Dr. Shirley Ann Jackson** was the first Black woman to receive a Ph.D. from MIT in any field. She went on to conduct physics research that allowed the creation of fiber optic cables, among many other things. **Mark Dean** is a Black computer scientist who holds three of IBM's original nine patents. He developed the system that allowed computers to communicate with external devices like printers and disk drives. He was also central to the development of the color computer monitor and the first gigahertz chip. **Marian Croak** holds over 200 technology-related patents and was instrumental in the development of Voice Over Internet Protocol, which allows us to use the Internet to make phone calls.

There are dozens more women and Black people who were part of the development of what we now know as the Internet. Their achievements are even more impressive given the obstacles they faced in terms of discrimination and denial of opportunity. There is something appealing about stories that focus on just a few heroic characters, and media histories tend to single out one or two innovators when they tell the story of technological innovation. From the complicated invention of the printing press to the often-mythologized development of the modern Internet, I hope you have learned that the simple story is not usually the best one. When we accept oversimplified accounts of media innovation, we not only rob ourselves of the truth, we dishonor the contributions of the many people who did the real work that provided us with modern communication technology. By being a bit skeptical and digging a little deeper, we can uncover some of the best, most interesting, and most inspirational stories in the annals of media history.

What to Study

KEY WORDS

Federal Networking Council

Internet

Packet switching

UNIVAC

COBOL

The ENIAC Six

Colossus

Binary code

ENIAC

IBM

ARPA, ARPAnet

Mainframe

Terminal

World Wide Web

HTTP

Idealized virtual identity hypothesis

Extended real-life hypothesis

Dataveillance

Net Neutrality

Technology gap

Digital divide

IMPORTANT PEOPLE

Lady Ada Byron Lovelace

Grace Hopper

Elizabeth Feinler

Dr. Radia Perlman

Roy Clay, Sr.

Dr. Glady West

Dr. Clarence Ellis

Dr. Shirley Ann Jackson

Mark Dean

Marian Croak

J.C.R. Licklider

Charles Babbage

Ada Byron Lovelace

John Mauchly and John Presper Eckert

Paul Baran

Ray Tomlinson

Vinton Cerf and Robert Kahn

Bill Gates and Paul Allen

Steve Jobs and Stephen Wozniak

Tim Berners-Lee

QUESTIONS YOU SHOULD BE ABLE TO ANSWER

- What are the four component parts of the definition of the Internet, and what do they tell us about it?
- What does it mean to say that the modern computer industry in the global West is defined by a gendered history of top-down structural discrimination? How did that occur? What does the focus on hardware versus software have to do with that?
- What is the problem with oversimplified histories of technological innovation?
- What are the conflicting versions of the origins of the Internet?

- Who is known as the originator of the computer, and why? What was the first electronic digital computer? How large were computers like ENIAC?
- What were the two benefits of Paul Baran's packet-switching scheme for ARPAnet? When did the ARPAnet go online, and who was involved?
- Roughly when did personal computers become available to the public? In what year did laptops outsell desktops for the first time? In what year did tablets outsell laptops for the first time?
- Who invented the World Wide Web, and where was he working at the time?
- What percentage of global Internet usage since 2017 has taken place via mobile devices?
- What percentage of Americans belong to at least one social networking site?
- Roughly what percentage of the world's population is currently being served by the Internet? How does that compare to that same statistic in the year 2000?
- What race of students in the U.S. are the least likely to have adequate Internet or devices to sustain effective distance learning at home? How do urban, suburban, and rural populations of students compare?

NOTES

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8. Barber, p. 4.
9. Barber, p. 3.

The Internet and Social Media

13



Are you confident that the online you is the *real* you?

Daniel M Ernst/Shutterstock

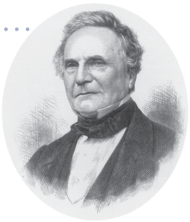
1885 ▶ Babbage designs "computer"

1940

1940s British develop Colossus and binary code
1946 ▶ ENIAC
1950 UNIVAC
1951 Census Bureau makes first successful commercial use of computers



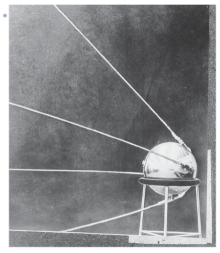
Apic/Hulton Archive/Getty Images



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1955

1957 ▶ *Sputnik* launched
1960 Licklider's *Man–Computer Symbiosis*; IBM mainframe technology
1962 ARPA commissions Baran to develop computer network
1964 McLuhan's *Understanding Media*
1969 ARPAnet goes online



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1970

1972 E-mail
1974 Internet emerges
1975 ▶ Gates develops PC operating system
1977 Jobs and Wozniak develop Apple II
1979 BITNET
1981 IBM PC introduced



Doug Wilson/Corbis Historical/Getty Images

1985

1990 HTTP developed
1992 Internet society chartered
1994 ▶ Spam appears; first banner ad
1995 Classmates.com launches
1999 Emojis appear



Y H Lim/Alamy Stock Photo

2000

2000 ▶ US women pass men as users
2004 Facebook launched
2006 Twitter
2007 Laptops outsell desktops; Apple app store opens
2009 Internet surpasses newspapers as news source; social networking surpasses e-mail for person-to-person communication
2010 First popular tablet computer
2012 25 billionth app download from Apple app store; Facebook buys Instagram; mobile becomes top e-mail platform
2015 Search engines overtake traditional media as most trusted news source; tablets outsell laptops and desktops
2016 Fake news plague; UN declares Internet access a fundamental human right
2017 Number of Internet of Things devices surpasses world population
2018 EU's General Data Protection Regulation; Trump's tweets ruled official government communication
2019 Internet Bill of Rights introduced in Congress
2020 Coronavirus in the US; United Nations declares broadband Internet access a fundamental human right; California Consumer Privacy Act; global app spending passes $100 billion
2021 Insurrection at US Capitol; President Trump's Twitter account permanently suspended
2023 Third-party cookies banned from Chrome



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JOHN PERRY BARLOW AND MARSHALL MCLUHAN HAVE BEEN TWO OF YOUR INTELLECTUAL HEROES EVER SINCE YOU STARTED COLLEGE.



John Perry Barlow.

ZUMA Press, Inc./Alamy Stock Photo

Cofounder of the Electronic Frontier Foundation, Barlow helped shape the world's hopes for the Internet in its earliest days. You can recite almost verbatim his vision. "We are creating a world that all may enter without privilege or prejudice accorded by race, economic power, military force, or station of birth," he said in 1996, "A world where anyone, anywhere may express his or her beliefs, no matter how singular, without fear of being coerced into silence or conformity" (in **Leman, 2020**).

Scholar and public intellectual McLuhan developed the concept of "the global village," the idea that as electronic media "shrink" the world, humans will become increasingly involved in one another's lives. As people come to know more about others once separated from them by distance, they will form a new, beneficial relationship, a global village.

But have electronic media brought you together? You've put yourself on a Twitter diet and dropped Facebook altogether because of the ugliness you encounter there every day. Your liberal and conservative friends seem to be living in different worlds entirely, getting their news and information from completely different news feeds off the Internet and social media. What's worse, they seem to be growing increasingly intolerant of each other's views. Far from living in a global village, it seems they're wrestling in a global mud pit.

You and your roommates aren't speaking because of an argument over a Reddit posting from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention warning against masks during the coronavirus pandemic. On seemingly official letterhead, it was a hoax meant to politicize communal health campaigns (**Reader, 2020**). When you offered official evidence, they thought you were calling them dupes. Maybe not everyone should express their beliefs, and your relationship with your roomies is anything but beneficial.

But the Internet can be magnificent. Sure, sometimes it's a challenge to get past the bad stuff, but you spend hours there every, not just on social media sharing joy with your friends, but streaming entertainment, looking for jobs and job advice, doing research for school. After all, the Internet puts the accumulated knowledge of the entire world's population at your fingertips.

In this chapter, we study the history of the Internet, beginning with the development of the computer, and then we look at the Internet as it exists today. We examine its formats and its capabilities. As you well know, digital technologies are significantly reshaping the operation of traditional media; and as the media with which we interact change, the role they play in our lives and the impact they have on us and our culture will likewise be altered. We will look at the new technologies' double edge (their ability to have both good and bad effects), their ability to foster greater freedom of expression, efforts to control that expression, changes in the meaning of and threats to personal privacy, and the promise and perils of practicing democracy online. Finally, our discussion of improving our media literacy takes the form of an examination of the Internet Bill of Rights.

A Short History of the Internet

There are conflicting versions about the origins of the Internet. In the words of media historian **Daniel J. Czitrom (2007)**, they involve "the military and the counterculture, the need for command and control and the impulse against hierarchy and toward decentralization" (p. 484). The more common story—the command-and-control version—is that the Internet is a product of the Cold War. In this version, the air force in 1962, wanting to maintain the military's ability to transfer information around the country even if a given area was destroyed in an enemy attack, commissioned leading computer scientists to develop the means to do so. However, many researchers and scientists dispute this "myth that [has] gone unchallenged long enough to become widely accepted as fact," that the Internet was initially "built to protect national security in the face of nuclear attack" (**Hafner & Lyon, 1996**, p. 10).



Marshall McLuhan.

Bettmann/Getty Images

In the decentralization version, as early as 1956 psychologist Joseph C. R. Licklider, a devotee of Marshall McLuhan's thinking on the power of communication technology, fore-saw linked computers creating a country of citizens "informed about, and interested in, and involved in, the process of government" (as quoted in **Hafner & Lyon, 1996**, p. 34). He foresaw "home computer consoles" and television sets connected in a nationwide network. "The political process would essentially be a giant teleconference," he wrote, "and a campaign would be a months-long series of communications among candidates, propagandists, commentators, political action groups, and voters.

The key," he added, "is the self-motivating exhilaration that accompanies truly effective interaction with information through a good console and a good network to a good computer" (p. 34).

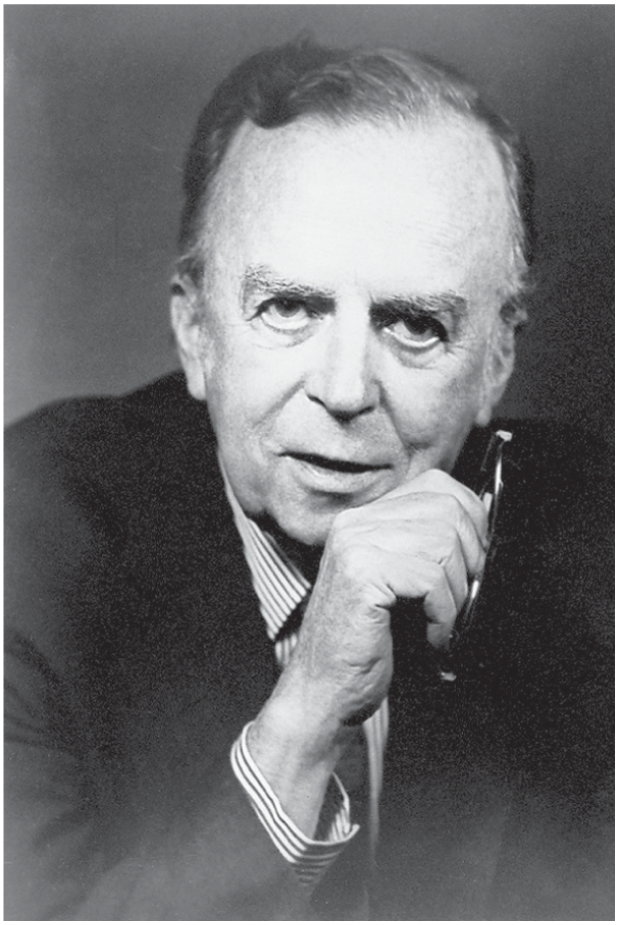
In what many technologists now consider to be the seminal essay on the potential and promise of computer networks, *Man–Computer Symbiosis*, Licklider, who had by now given up psychology and devoted himself completely to computer science, wrote in 1960, "The hope is that in not too many years, human brains and computing machines will be coupled . . . tightly, and the resulting partnership will think as no human brain has ever thought and process data in a way not approached by the information handling machines we know today" (as quoted in **Hafner & Lyon, 1996**, p. 35). Scores of computer experts, enthused by Licklider's vision (and many more who saw networked computers as a way to gain access to the powerful but otherwise expensive and unavailable computers just beginning to become available), joined the rush toward the development of what we know today as the **Internet**, a global network of interconnected computers that communicate freely and share and exchange information.

Development of the Computer

The title "originator of the computer" resides with Englishman Charles Babbage. Lack of money and unavailability of the necessary technology stymied his plan to build an "analytical engine," a steam-driven computer. But in the mid-1880s, aided by the insights of mathematician Lady Ada Byron Lovelace, Babbage did produce designs for a "computer" that could conduct algebraic computations using stored memory and punch cards for input and output. His work provided inspiration for those who would follow.

Over the next 100 years, a number of mechanical and electromechanical computers were attempted, some with success. But Colossus, developed by the British to break the Germans' secret codes during World War II, was the first electronic **digital computer**. It reduced information to a **binary code**—that is, a code made up of the digits 1 and 0. In this form, information could be stored and manipulated. The first "full-service" electronic computer, ENIAC (Electronic Numerical Integrator and Calculator), based on the work of Iowa State's John V. Atanasoff, was introduced by scientists John Mauchly and John Presper Eckert of the Moore School of Electrical Engineering at the University of Pennsylvania in 1946.

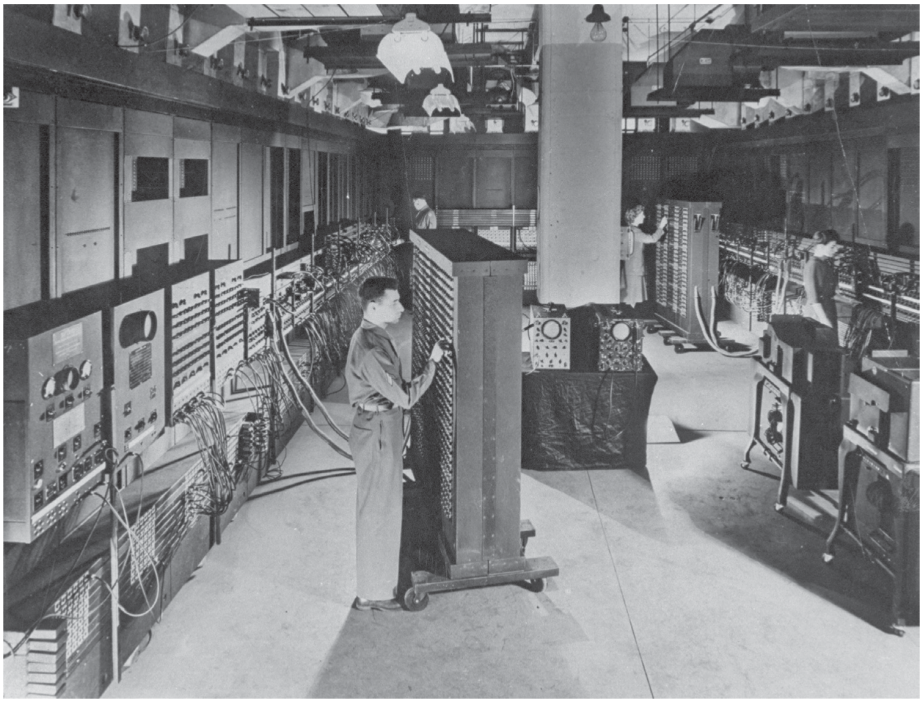
ENIAC hardly resembled the computers we know today: 18 feet tall, 80 feet long, and weighing 60,000 pounds, it was composed of 17,500 vacuum tubes and 500 miles of electrical wire. It could fill an auditorium and ate up 150,000 watts of electricity. Mauchly and Eckert eventually left the university to form their own computer company, later selling it to the Remington Rand Corporation in 1950. At Remington, they developed UNIVAC (Universal Automatic Computer), which, when bought for and used by the Census Bureau in 1951, became the first successful commercial computer.



▼ Joseph C. R. Licklider envisioned a national system of interconnected home computers as early as 1956.

From the MIT Museum, ©Koby-Antupit Studio, Cambridge/Belmont, MA

The commercial computer explosion was ignited by IBM. Using its already well-entrenched organizational system of trained sales and service professionals, IBM helped businesses find their way in the early days of the computer revolution. One of its innovations was to sell rather than rent computers to customers, boosting diffusion of the new technology.



ENIAC.

Apic/Hulton Archive/Getty Images

Military Applications

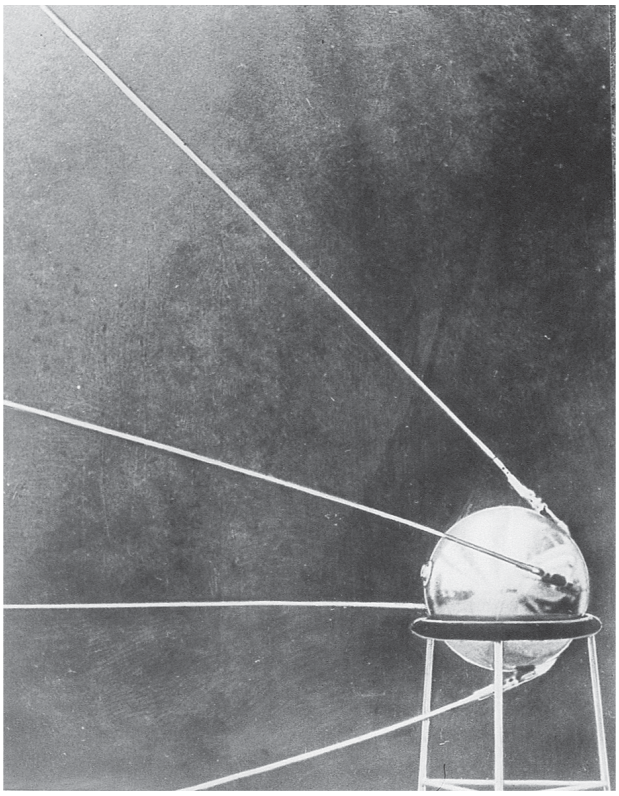
In 1957, the Soviet Union launched *Sputnik*, Earth's first human-constructed satellite. The once-undisputed supremacy of the United States in science and technology had been usurped, and American scientists and military officials were in shock. The Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA) was immediately established to sponsor and coordinate sophisticated defense-related research. In 1962, as part of a larger drive to promote the use of computers in national defense (and giving rise to one of the stories of the Internet's origins), ARPA commissioned

Paul Baran of the Rand Corporation to produce a plan that would enable the US military to maintain command over its missiles and planes if a nuclear attack knocked out conventional means of communication. The military thought a decentralized communication network was necessary. In that way, no matter where the bombing occurred, other locations would be available to launch a counterattack. Among Baran's plans was one for a "packet switched network." He wrote,

Packet switching is the breaking down of data into datagrams or packets that are labeled to indicate the origin and the destination of the information and the forwarding of these packets from one computer to another computer until the information arrives at its final destination computer. This (is) crucial to the realization of a computer network. If packets are lost at any given point, the message can be resent by the originator. (As cited in **Kristula, 1997**, p. 1)

The genius of the system Baran envisioned is twofold: (1) common communication rules (called **protocols**) and common computer languages would enable any type of computer, running with any operating system, to communicate with any other; and (2) destination or delivery instructions

embedded in all information sent on the system would enable instantaneous “detours” or “rerouting” if a given computer on the network became unavailable.



▼ The Soviet Union’s 23-inches-in-diameter, 184-pound *Sputnik* was not only the first human-made satellite to orbit Earth; it also sent shudders throughout the American scientific and military communities.

ZENTRALBILD PICTURE SERVICE/ TASS-MOS/AP Images

Using Honeywell computers at Stanford University, UCLA, the University of California–Santa Barbara, and the University of Utah, the switching network, called ARPAnet, went online in 1969 and became fully operational and reliable within one year. Other developments soon followed. In 1972, an engineer named Ray Tomlinson created the first e-mail program (and gave us the ubiquitous @ symbol). In 1974, Stanford University’s Vinton Cerf and the military’s Robert Kahn coined the term “the Internet.” In 1979, a graduate student at the University of North Carolina, Steve Bellovin, created Usenet and, independent of Bellovin, IBM created BITNET. These two networking software systems enabled virtually anybody with access to a Unix or IBM computer to connect to others on the growing network.



A 1960s-vintage IBM mainframe computer. The personal computer in your home probably carries more computing power than this giant machine.

Agence France Presse/Getty Images

By the time the Internet Society was chartered and the World Wide Web was released in 1992, there were more than 1.1 million **hosts**—computers linking individual personal computer users to the Internet. Today there is an ever-expanding number, 1.1 billion and growing (**Clement, 2020**).

The Personal Computer

A crucial part of the story of the Internet is the development and diffusion of personal computers. IBM was fantastically successful at exciting businesses, schools and universities, and other organizations about computers. But IBM's and other companies' **mainframe** and **minicomputers** employed **terminals**, and these stations at which users worked were connected to larger, centralized machines. As a result, the Internet at first was the province of the people who worked in those settings.

When the semiconductor (or integrated circuit, or chip) replaced the vacuum tube as the essential information processor in computers, its tiny size, absence of heat, and low cost made possible the design and production of small, affordable **microcomputers**, or **personal computers (PCs)**. This, of course, opened the Internet to anyone, anytime. Laptop computers, which outsold desktop models for the first time in 2007, extended that reach to anywhere. The tablet computer was first introduced in 2006 by Microsoft. It remained a niche computer favored by medical professionals for years. But the 2010 introduction of the iPad (operated not by mouse but by touch screen) not only continued the expansion of computing to anyone, anywhere, but it also made it even more convenient. In 2013, tablets outsold laptops for the first time and outsold both laptops and desktops in 2015 (**Anthony, 2014**).

The leaders of the personal computer revolution were Bill Gates and the duo of Steve Jobs and Stephen Wozniak. As a first-year college student in 1975, Gates saw a magazine story about a small, low-powered computer, the MITS Altair 8800 (developed by Micro Instrumentation and Telemetry Systems, an American electronics company), that could be built from a kit and used to play a simple game. Sensing that the future of computing was in these personal computers and that the power of computers would reside not in their size but in the software that ran them, Gates dropped out of Harvard University and, with his friend Paul Allen, founded Microsoft Corporation. They licensed their **operating system**—the software that tells the computer how to work—to MITS.



▲ The originators of the personal computing revolution—Bill Gates, Steve Jobs, and Stephen Wozniak.

(Left): Doug Wilson/Corbis Historical/Getty Images; (Middle): Paul Sakuma/AP Images; (Right): Mickey Pfleger/The LIFE Images Collection/Getty Images



▲ The desktop computer opened the Internet to anyone, anytime. The laptop extended that reach to anywhere. The tablet made anytime, anywhere more convenient.

(Left): Canadapanda/Shutterstock; (Right Top): sdecoret/Shutterstock; (Right Bottom): PSL Images/Alamy Stock Photo

With this advance, people no longer had to know sophisticated operating languages to use computers. At nearly the same time, in 1977, Jobs and Wozniak, also college dropouts, perfected Apple II, a low-cost, easy-to-use microcomputer designed specifically for personal rather than business use. It was immediately and hugely successful, especially in its development of **multimedia** capabilities —advanced sound and image applications. IBM, stung by its failure to enter the personal computer business, contracted with Microsoft to use its operating system in its IBM PC, first introduced in 1981. All of the pieces were now in place for the home computer revolution.

The Internet Today

The Internet is most appropriately thought of as a "network of networks" that is still growing at an incredibly fast rate. These networks consist of LANs (local area networks), connecting two or more computers, usually within the same building, and **WANs (wide area networks)**, connecting several LANs in different locations. When people access the Internet from a computer in a university library, they are most likely on a LAN. But when several universities (or businesses or other organizations) link their computer systems, their users are part of a WAN.

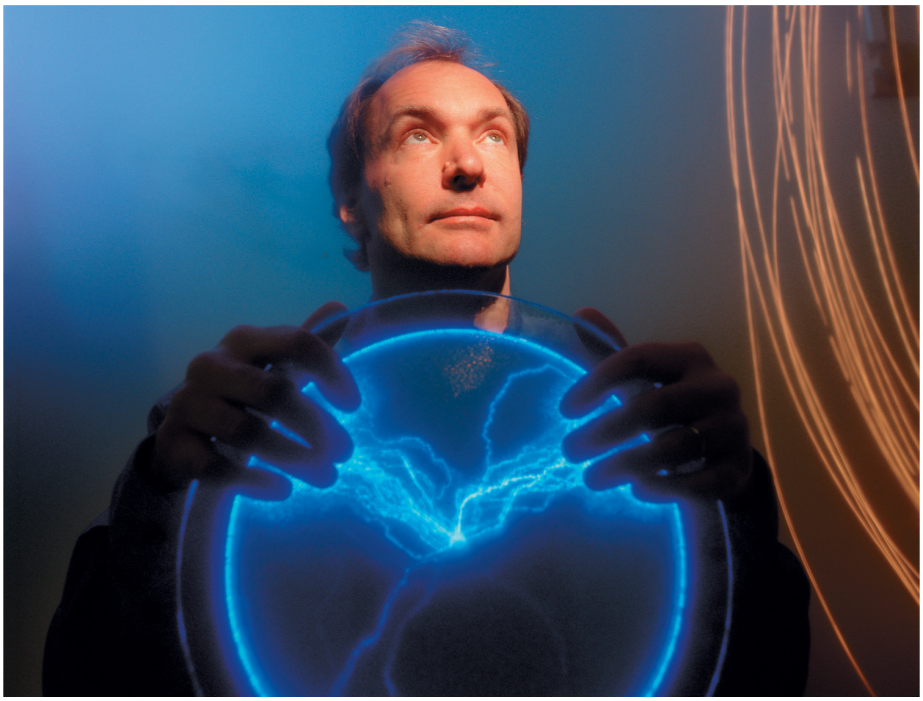
As the popularity of the Internet has grown, so has the number of **ISPs (Internet service providers)**, companies that offer Internet connections at monthly rates depending on the kind and amount of access needed. There are hundreds of ISPs operating in the United States, including some of the better known such as Earthlink and Century Link. Americans increasingly find that their ISP and video (cable or FiOS) providers are one and the same— for example, Comcast and Verizon. A majority of all American Internet users have their cable company as their ISP. Through providers, users can avail themselves of the Internet's many services, among them the World Wide Web, search engines, and browsers.

The World Wide Web

Although we often use the terms interchangeably, the Internet and the World Wide Web aren't the same thing. The Internet is a massive network of networks, a networking infrastructure connecting billions of computers across the globe, allowing them to communicate with one another. However, the **World Wide Web** (usually referred to as "the Web") is a means of accessing information on the Internet. Think of the Internet as "composed of the machines, hardware and data, and the World Wide Web is what brings this technology to life," suggests technology writer Jessica **Toothman (2017**).

The Web is not a physical place, or a set of files, or even a network of computers. The heart of the Web lies in the protocols that define its use. The World Wide Web (WWW) uses hypertext transfer protocols (HTTP) to transport files from one place to another. Hypertext transfer was developed in the early 1990s by England's Tim Berners-Lee, who was working at CERN, the international particle physics laboratory near Geneva, Switzerland. Berners-Lee gave HTTP to the world for free. "The Web is more a social creation than a technical one," he wrote. "I designed it for a social effect—to help people work together—and not as a technical toy. The ultimate goal of the Web is to support and improve our web-like existence in the world" (**Berners-Lee & Fischetti, 1999**, p. 128).

Berners-Lee is acutely aware of the problems of the Internet that gave rise to our opening vignette, but remains optimistic. "Against the backdrop of news stories about how the web is misused, it's understandable that many people feel afraid and unsure if the web is really a force for good," he wrote on the occasion of the 30th anniversary of the release of his innovation. "But given how much the web has changed in the past 30 years, it would be defeatist and unimaginative to assume that the web as we know it can't be changed for the better in the next 30" (in **Sullivan, 2019**).



Web inventor Tim Berners-Lee.

Catrina Genovese/WireImage/Getty Images

We enjoy the World Wide Web in part because of its ease of access, a function of a number of components: hosts, URLs, browsers, search engines, and home pages.

HOSTS (COMPUTERS CONNECTED TO THE INTERNET)

Most Internet activity consists of users accessing files on remote computers. To reach these files, users must first gain access to the Internet through "wired-to-the-Net" hosts. These hosts are often called servers.

Once users gain access to a host computer on the Internet, they then have to find the exact location of the file they are looking for *on* the host. Each file or directory on the Internet (that is, on the host computer connected to the Internet) is designated by a **URL (uniform resource locator)**. A URL is, in effect, a site's official address. But as any user of the Web knows, sites are more commonly recognized by their **domain names**. The last part of a site's address, the *.com* or *.org*, is its top-level domain name, so we know that .com is a business and .org is a nonprofit. But in 2012 the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers, or ICANN, authorized the use of a virtually unlimited number of generic top-level domains to include almost any word or name, for example, *.defibrillator* or *.newyorkcity.* It also permits, for the first time, the use of non-Latin language scripts, such as Arabic, Chinese, and Cyrillic. The number of individual domains, or websites, changes by the minute, but a 2017 analysis by Google counted 130 trillion unique URLs operating on the Internet, a growth of 100 million pages in the previous 4 years ("Google Search," 2017).

Smartphones

Smartphones make connecting to the Internet, already an anytime, anywhere activity thanks to laptops and tablets, even more convenient. There is no need to search for a site or use a browser because an app on your smartphone will take you directly to its designated content. (Global spending on apps from the Apple Apps Store and Google Play passed the $100 billion mark in 2020; **Richter, 2021**.) Today, 77% of all Americans own at least one smartphone (**Georgiev, 2020**). And they are committed to those mobile devices; the average user spends more than 3 hours a day on a smartphone (**Dolliver, 2020**), and 47% say they "couldn't live" without one (**Metev, 2020**). Since 2017, mobile devices have accounted for half of all global Internet usage, in fact, more than 60% (**"Ultimate," 2021**).

Social Media

Of course, much mobile use is devoted to social media. Where e-mail was long the Internet's most common and fastest-growing use, it was surpassed in 2009 by **social networking sites (SNSs)**, websites that function as online communities of users. Today 80% of all Americans belong to at least one SNS (**Edison Research, 2020**); globally, SNS users average 2 hours and 25 minutes a day engaged with social media (Americans average 18 fewer minutes; **Faw, 2021**). And it was Facebook's specific desire to make itself even more attractive to mobile users that drove the company in 2012 to buy the 2-year-old, purely mobile photo start-up Instagram for $1 billion. Instagram now has more than a billion worldwide users, 89% outside the United States (**Systrom, 2020**).

Classmates.com's 1995 launch began the social networking movement, and it was soon followed by similar sites, most notably Friendster in 2002 and LinkedIn in 2003. MySpace also launched in 2003 and quickly became a favorite of young people around the world until it was unseated by Facebook, which was Harvard University–specific at birth in 2004 and became global in 2006. Worldwide, there are 2.8 billion active monthly Facebook users, 1.84 billion of whom log in daily (**Moshin, 2021**).

These "old line" sites were joined in 2006 by Twitter, a social media site designed for "microblogging," posts of up to 280 characters (called *tweets*) displayed on senders' profile pages and delivered to their subscribers (*followers*). Delivery can be restricted to a specific circle of followers, or, by default, it can be public. There are 353 million active monthly users globally, 187 million of whom access the site daily (**Dean, 2021**). While much of this activity is innocuous, such as following a celebrity (singer Justin Bieber has 114 million followers), much of it is serious.

To push back at the flood of misinformation about the coronavirus during the 2020 pandemic, dozens of celebrities gave their Twitter accounts over to health experts as part of the #PassTheMic campaign (**Wanshel, 2020**). And it was Twitter that helped galvanize global protests in support of the Black Lives Matter movement following the police killing of George Floyd. "Social media participation becomes a key site from which to contest mainstream media silences and the long history of state-sanctioned violence against racialized populations" explained researchers Yarimar Bonilla and Jonathan Rosa (in **Warzel, 2020**, p. SR2).

Twitter is also the medium of choice for many world leaders and other newsmakers. For example, President Trump regularly used it to bypass what he called the "fake news" to communicate directly with his millions of followers, though the traditional media would often report on his tweets. So central had Twitter become to the conduct of this particular president's governance that a federal judge in 2018 ruled Mr. Trump's Twitter feed "an official government account," akin to a "digital town hall," and therefore open to supporters and critics alike, free from the threat of blocking (**Herman & Savage, 2018**, p. B1). However, in January 2021, in the wake of the violent assault on the US Capitol by the President's supporters hoping to overturn his reelection loss, both Twitter and Facebook suspended Mr. Trump's accounts, citing his sedition- and violence-inciting postings (**Perrigo, 2021**). Twitter, concerned about "the risk of further incitement of violence," banned the President's account "permanently" (**Conger & Isaac, 2021**, p. A1). The use of SNSs for news and politics, as you can see, is a very sharp double-edged sword.

There are scores of other social networking sites. Some are general interest and growing in popularity, especially with younger users, for example, Snapchat (users post images and video that are viewable for only a short time) and Pinterest (users upload or search, save, sort, and manage images and videos into collections called *boards* that serve as personalized media platforms). Others are narrower communities built around specific interests, for example, CafeMom (for mothers), BlackPlanet (for the African American community), and Foursquare (for those who want their followers to know where they are and make recommendations of nearby services and activities). There are even audio SMS, for example, Clubhouse, which allow invited users to "drop in" for conversation.

The Debate over Social Media's Value

Just as the benefits and risks—the double edge—of the Internet as a whole continue to be debated, a number of issues specific to social media are generating their own disagreement. We'll take a brief look at some of the most common questions surrounding our use of social media: Why do we engage others on social media, and how realistically do we present ourselves when we do? Do Facebook depression and Facebook envy exist? And are we substituting social media interaction for real-world relationships?

PRESENTATION OF SELF

There must be a reason that 80% of all US adults belong to at least one social networking site and that the average North American Internet user has 6.8 social media accounts (**Mander, Kavanagh, & Buckle, 2020**).

One answer to the *why* of our engagement with social networking sites resides in the **dual-factor model of social media use**, which claims that this engagement is motivated by two basic social needs. The first is *the need to belong*, our natural desire to associate with other people and gain their acceptance. The second, *the need for self-presentation*, is our ongoing effort to shape what others think of us. The two operate simultaneously because social media activity not only tells us we belong (that's where our friends are), but it increases our sense of acceptance and, therefore, our self-esteem (**Nadkarni & Hofmann, 2012**). In fact, the simple act of updating and reading our own profiles boosts our self-esteem (**Gonzales & Hancock, 2011**).

But once we've made the decision to use social media, we must decide *how* we present ourselves. Many people worry about their privacy when online, but in our everyday use of social media we willingly offer even the minutest details about our lives, taking pains to update those offerings, and even supporting those entries with visual evidence. When we do this we make judgments about the self we choose to reveal. We select our screen names and profile pictures to identify ourselves as we wish to be identified. But do we openly try to deceive? If you think most social media users do, you subscribe to the **idealized virtual identity hypothesis**, which argues that social media users tend to show idealized characteristics that do not reflect who they really are.

But this does not happen as much as you might think. For most users, time on social media constitutes "an extended social context in which to express [their] actual personality characteristics, thus fostering accurate interpersonal perceptions. [Social media] integrate various sources of personal information that mirror those found in personal environments, private thoughts, facial images, and social behavior, all of which are known to contain valid information about personality" (**Back et al., 2010**, p. 372). As a result, social media use makes it a bit difficult to hide who we actually are, and as such it's more likely that the **extended real-life hypothesis**, the idea that we use social media to communicate something

close to our actual identities, holds true. The openness of social media makes it very difficult to control information about ourselves and our reputations—others can post information about us—and our friends constantly provide accountability and feedback on our profiles and other material we post. That is, those who know us keep us honest.

Nonetheless, the widespread use of **finstas**, second ("f" for fake) Instagram accounts offering less-curated, more natural versions of self to a trustworthy circle of friends, suggests that users are keenly aware that the selves they present on their primary SNS accounts are likely a bit optimistically painted (**Kang & Wei, 2020**).

SOCIAL MEDIA USE AND SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING

Can all this effort to present our best, truthful selves carry too much of a toll? For many young people the answer seems to be "yes." The American Academy of Pediatrics recognizes **Facebook depression**, "depression that develops when preteens and teens spend a great deal of time on social media sites, such as Facebook, and then begin to exhibit classic symptoms of depression. Acceptance by and contact with peers is an important element of adolescent life. The intensity of the online world is thought to be a factor that may trigger depression in some adolescents" (**O'Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011**, p. 802).

Indeed, Christina Sagioglou and Tobias Greitmeyer (2014), whose research led them to express surprise "that Facebook enjoys such great popularity," demonstrated that **affective forecasting error**—the discrepancy between the expected and actual emotions generated by Facebook activity—produces a decline in users' mood after using the social networking site (p. 361).

There is also evidence of another emotional downside to social networking: **Facebook envy**. As Page 357 many as one in three Facebook users say they are sometimes resentful of the happiness others show on social media. Commentary on "travel and leisure," "social interactions," and "happiness" are the three most frequent generators of envy (**Krasnova et al., 2013**, p. 7). And if you use social media, you know that these are the topics your friends usually emphasize in their posts; who wants friends who report where they didn't go, who they didn't spend time with, and how unhappy they are? You can see what frustrates users about their SNS use in **Figure 13.1**.



◀ **Figure 13.1** Frustrations with Social Media.

Source: ***Mander, Kavanagh, & Buckle, 2020****.*
(Photo): LeoPatrizi/E+/Getty Images

Findings such as these have led social scientists to test the relationship between SNSs and subjective well-being, that is, how users feel about themselves. *Subjective well-being* operates on two levels: how people feel about themselves in the moment, and how satisfied they are with their lives in general. Subjective well-being is important in how we live our lives, as it is related to such things as better health and a longer life, career success and even marital satisfaction.

Existing research suggests that SNS use diminishes our personal sense of well-being to the point that it can weaken the benefits of actual real-world friendships. Public health researchers Holly **Shakya and Nicholas Christakis (2017)** discovered that Facebook use is negatively associated with self-reported mental health, self-reported life satisfaction, and body mass index. This led them to conclude, "The negative associations of Facebook use were comparable to or greater in magnitude than the positive impact of offline interactions" (p. 203).

Many users recognize SNS's impact on their emotional health. Three-quarters of Americans have taken steps to distance themselves from Facebook (**Tolentino, 2019**), and 54% of 13 to 38 year-

olds admit that being constantly on social media worsens their mental well-being (**O'Malley, 2019**).

So while there may be little disagreement that SNS use generally leads to declines in subjective well-being, the actual *use* of SNSs may not be the important issue. For example, research shows that effects on well-being are related to the *quality* of the relationships between SNS users: "Receiving targeted, composed communication from strong ties [is] associated with improvements in well-being while viewing friends' wide-audience broadcasts and receiving one-click feedback [is] not. . . . People derive benefits from online communication, as long it comes from people they care about and has been tailored for them" (**Burke & Kraut, 2016**, p. 265).

And Philippe Verduyn and his colleagues discovered, and as a media-literate SNS user you'll understand, that it is not SNS use itself, but how active people are in that use. Specifically, *passive* use (monitoring others' sites without engaging with them) leads to lower subjective well-being because it "provokes social comparisons and envy," and *active* use (directly engaging with others) boosts it "by creating social capital and stimulating feelings of social connectedness" (**Verduyn, 2017**, p. 274).

SOCIAL ISOLATION

Finally, this raises the question of what is a "friend" on social media. What does *friendship* mean when the average Facebook user has 338 friends (K. **Smith, 2019**)? Are we connected online but disconnected in real life? Psychologist John Cacioppo has indeed demonstrated that "the greater the proportion of face-to-face interactions, the less lonely you are. The greater the proportion of online interactions, the lonelier you are." However, recognizing social media's double edge, he concluded that social media are not at the root of social isolation; they are merely tools, good or bad, depending on how they are used. "If you use Facebook to increase face-to-face contact, it increases social capital," he said. "Facebook can be terrific, if we use it properly. It's like a car. You can drive it to pick up your friends. Or you can drive alone" (in **Marche, 2012**).

The Internet, Social Media, and Their Users

We typically think of people who access a medium as audience members, but social media and the Internet have *users*, not audience members. At any time—or even at the same time— a person may be both *reading* online content and *creating* content. E-mail, social media, and chat rooms are obvious examples of online users being both audience and creators, but others exist as well. For example, massively multiplayer online roleplaying games (MMORPGs) enable entire alternative realities to be simultaneously constructed and engaged, and computer screens that have multiple open windows enable users to read one site while writing on another and uploading audio and video to even another. With ease, we can access the Web, link from site to site and page to page, and even build our own sites. The Internet makes us all journalists, broadcasters, commentators, critics, filmmakers, and advice columnists.

It is almost impossible to tell exactly how many users there are on the Internet. People who own computers are not necessarily linked to the Internet, and people need not own computers to use the Internet, as many users access the Internet through devices at school, a library, or work. Current best estimates indicate that there are at least 4.9 billion users worldwide—63% of Earth's population and a 1,271% increase since 2000. Ninety percent of North Americans use the Internet, a 208% increase since 2000, a rapid rate of growth due in large part to the spread of smartphones (**"World Internet Users," 2021**). The Internet's demographics have undergone some dramatic shifts since its early years. In 1996, for example, 62% of American Internet users were men. In 2000, women became the Internet's majority gender for the first time (**Hamilton, 2000**). Today, women in every age group use the Internet more than men do. And not surprisingly, the younger a person, the greater the likelihood is that he or she has access to the Internet. And for better or worse, 63% of global Internet users say they are "constantly online" (**Mander, Kavanagh, & Buckle, 2020**).

Reconceptualizing Life in an Interconnected World

What happens to people as they are increasingly interconnected? What becomes of audiences and users as their roles are electronically intertwined? How free are we to express ourselves? Does greater connectivity with others mean a loss of privacy? These are only a few of the questions confronting us as we attempt to find the right balance between the benefits and drawbacks that come from the new communication technologies.

The Double Edge of Technology

The root of the frustration with the Internet highlighted in the opening vignette is one of perspective. McLuhan was theorizing in the relative youth of the electronic media. When *Understanding Media* was published in 1964, television had just recently become a mass medium, the personal computer was years away, and Paul Baran was still envisioning ARPAnet. Barlow began writing about the Internet in the 1990s, the Internet's wide-open early days. The Web was brand new; there was no Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, or TikTok; no Google, no apps, not even Wikipedia.

Still, neither visionary was completely right or wrong in their optimism. Technology alone, even the powerful electronic media that fascinated both, cannot create new worlds or new ways of seeing them. *We* use technology to do these things. This is why technology is a double-edged sword.

Its power—for good and for bad—resides in us. The same aviation technology that we use to visit relatives halfway around the world can also be used to drop bombs in a war zone. The same communication technologies used to create a truly global village can be used to dehumanize and demean the people who live in it. For better or worse, ongoing misuse of the Internet's great power has even its developers and once-staunch supporters calling for dramatic change in the Internet itself and how it's used, as you can read in the essay "From Those on the Inside: It's Time to Fix the Internet."



"I'm making sure that my self-inflated Wikipedia entry corresponds to my self-inflated Facebook profile."

▼ Technologies, even those with as much potential as the Internet and social media, are only as good as the uses we make of them.

Bacall, Aaron/CartoonStock

Freedom of the Press for Whom?

The late veteran *New Yorker* columnist A. J. Liebling, author of that magazine's "Wayward Press" feature and often called the "conscience of journalism," frequently argued that freedom of the press is guaranteed only to those who own one. Theoretically, anyone can own a broadcast outlet or cable television operation. However, the number of outlets in any community is limited, and they are unavailable to all but the richest people and corporations. Theoretically, anyone can own a newspaper or magazine, but again the expense involved makes this an impossibility for most people. Newsletters, similar to soap-box speakers on a street corner, are limited in reach, typically of interest to those who already agree with the message, and relatively unsophisticated when compared with the larger commercial media.

USING MEDIA TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

From Those on the Inside: It's Time to Fix the Internet

In 1969, computer interconnectivity visionary J. C. R. Licklider predicted, "Life will be happier for the on-line individual" (in **Lepore, 2021**, p. 56). But is it? Massive data breaches reveal the personal data of billions of users to identity thieves and other criminals (**Gontovnikas, 2020**). When Facebook's own employees presented evidence that their platform was being used to sow divisiveness and hate, management buried the report rather than take steps to address the problem (**Horwitz & Seetharaman, 2020**). Because of their failure to control the spread of lies about the integrity of the 2020 presidential election, much of the blame for the violent invasion of the US Capitol by angry Trump-supporting insurrectionists in January 2021 fell directly at the feet of Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube (**Ghosh, 2021**).

Reddit is a major platform in the **manosphere**, the online home to self-proclaimed men's rights activists who harbor, express, and occasionally act on their ill will toward women (**Basu, 2020**). Users worry about their privacy (**Reicin, 2021**) and kids are illegally tracked by the online games they play (**University of Texas, 2020**). In April 2020, as the global COVID-19 pandemic was escalating, a group of 82 websites spreading COVID misinformation gathered half a billion Facebook's views. The 10 most popular alone drew 300 million views; the 10 leading legitimate health institutions, 70 million. The National Center for Disaster Preparedness estimated that of the 217,000 COVID deaths by October, 130,000 could have been avoided but for a "mislead public" and, not unrelated, lack of a mask mandate (**Zuboff, 2021**, p. SR4).

Critics contend that social media feed **surveillance capitalism**, an economic system dependent on the buying and selling of people's personal data, the capture and production of which relies on mass surveillance of the Internet. Under surveillance capitalism, our personal human experiences become free source material for tech giants, "one-way-mirror operations engineered for our ignorance and wrapped in a fog of misdirection, euphemism, and mendacity," in the words of Harvard University business scholar Shoshana **Zuboff (2020**, p. SR1). And as you read in **Chapter 4**, the Internet decimated the newspaper industry's financial foundation in particular, and that of democracy-sustaining journalism in general.

It's no surprise, then, that the number of Internet users who see the Web as "good for society" is declining (Smith & Olmstead, 2018). But what is surprising is the growing demand for change coming from those who built the Internet's great power. Inventor of the World Wide Web Tim Berners-Lee is "devastated" by the failure of the Web to serve humanity (**Brooker, 2018**). Apple CEO Tim Cook warns, "We see vividly, painfully how technology can harm, rather than help. [The platforms can] magnify our worst human tendencies . . . deepen divisions, incite violence and even undermine our shared sense

or what is true or false. This crisis is real. Those of us who believe in technology's potential for good must not shrink from this moment" (in **Grothaus, 2018**).

Chamath Palihapitiya, an early Facebook executive, feels "tremendous guilt" about his role in building that SNS. "The short term, dopamine-driven feedback loops that we have created are destroying how society works," he wrote. "No civil discourse, no cooperation, misinformation, mistruth" (in **Gelles, 2018**, p. B1). Former Google executive Tristan **Harris (2018)** laments, "Religions and governments don't have that much influence over people's lives. But we have three technology companies [Facebook, Google, and Amazon] who have this system that frankly they don't even have control over. . . . Right now, 2 billion people's minds are already jacked in to this automated system, and it's steering people's thoughts toward either personalized paid advertising or misinformation or conspiracy theories."

These insiders are clearly not satisfied with the difference their medium is making. But what about you? Must we accept the Internet's bad to benefit from its good? Yes, 53% of Americans say the Internet has been an essential source of information during the 2020 coronavirus pandemic (**Vogels, Perrin, Rainie, & Anderson, 2020**), but the flood of online misinformation and outright deception is so great that the United Nations Secretary-General warned of "a pandemic of misinformation," and the head of the World Health Organization said we are suffering an "infodemic" (**Rogers, 2020**). Is this a reasonable trade-off?

Why is so much of the criticism of this seemingly marvelous technology coming from those on the inside? Is it that they feel a heightened sense of responsibility for what they have built and promoted? If that's the case, what is *our* responsibility to ensure that the Internet is used for good? Consider tech writer Joanne McNeil's admonition. The Internet's "infrastructure is power," she said, "but it is not the law, which means there is still an opportunity for users—as individuals and collectives, and working with government bodies—to hold platforms accountable" (in **Borst, 2020**, p. 33).

The Internet, however, turns every user into a potential mass communicator. Equally important, on the Internet every "publisher" is equal. The websites of the biggest government agency, the most powerful broadcast network, the newspaper with the highest circulation, the richest ad agencies and public relations firms, the most far-flung religion, and the lone user with an idea or cause figuratively sit side by side. Each is only as powerful as its ideas.

In other words, the Internet can give voice to those typically denied expression. Because the Internet is fast, far-reaching, personal, and easy to use, *connective action* can produce effective *collective action*. Movement researchers Lance **Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg (2012)** explain, "In this connective logic, taking public action or contributing to a common good becomes an act of personal expression and recognition or self-validation achieved by sharing ideas and actions in trusted relationships. Sometimes the people in these exchanges may be on the other side of the world, but they do not require a club, a party, or a shared ideological frame to make the connection" (pp. 752–753).

But not all online activism is collective. There is much individually inspired social involvement, sometimes derogatorily called **slacktivism** because it seems to require little real effort. Social movement

scholar Jennifer **Earl (2016)** argues that "slacktivists" have no need to apologize for their work, because slacktivism can effect significant social good given that the Web provides slacktivists with two important benefits: It greatly reduces the costs for creating, organizing, and participating in protests, and it erases the need for activists to be physically together in order to act collectively.

For example, slacktivists publicly embarrassed white supremacists, tricking them into rallying against an imaginary Gettysburg National Military Park flag burning (**Boburg & Bennett, 2020**); spawned scores of individual actions demanding justice for Breonna Taylor after her killing by Louisville, Kentucky police (**de la Cretaz, 2020**); and as you read earlier, fueled the #MeToo movement against sexual assault and led *Seventeen* to commit to a "Body Peace Treaty" in which it promised to stop changing models' body and face shapes (see **Chapter 5**). Thirty-two percent of American social media users have used their accounts to encourage others to take action on issues they deem important (**Auxier, 2020**).



After the police killing of Breonna Taylor, those seeking justice for her death took to social media to motivate others to engage in acts of protest around the country.

Lev Radin/Sipa USA/Alamy Stock Photo

The Internet also offers expanded expression through weblogs, or blogs. Before September 11, 2001, blogs were typically personal online diaries. But after that tragic day, possibly because millions of people felt that the traditional press had left them unprepared and clueless about what was really going on in the world, blogs changed. *Blogs* now refers to regularly updated online journals of commentary, often containing links to the material on which they are commenting. There are more than 600 million active blogs worldwide (**"27 Important," 2020**).

Blogs can also be more agile than the traditional media. More so than these older, more cumbersome media, they encourage citizen action in a newly *see-through society.* For example, millions of bloggers constantly and in real time fact-check political candidates. Some track the flow of money to politicians, connecting it to how they vote on important public issues. They remind the powerful that "little

brother" is watching. Images caught by chance on a smartphone, arcane public data that go otherwise unexamined, and citizen video taken at official events all make their way to the Internet and social media and to the people. This is no small matter, as the Internet has surpassed newspapers as Americans' primary news source (**Mindlin, 2009**) and, in 2015, search engines, primarily Google, overtook the traditional media as Americans' most trusted way to find news (**Sterling, 2015**).



In 2020, slacktivists used social media to dupe white supremacists into rallying against an imaginary flag burning at the Gettysburg National Military Park.

Andrew Lichtenstein/Corbis/Getty Images

Copyright (Intellectual Property Ownership)

Another freedom-of-expression issue that takes on a special nature on the Internet is copyright. Copyright protection is designed to ensure that those who create content are financially compensated for their work. The assumption is that more "authors" will create more content if assured of monetary compensation from those who use it. When the content is tangible (books, movies, magazines, CDs), authorship and use are relatively easy to identify. But in the cyberworld, things become a bit more complex. John Perry **Barlow (1996)**, whom you met in the chapter's opening vignette, explained the situation relatively early in the life of the Internet:

> The riddle is this: If our property can be infinitely reproduced and instantaneously distributed all over the planet without cost, without our knowledge, without its even leaving our possession, how can we protect it? How are we going to get paid for the work we do with our minds? And, if we can't get paid, what will assure the continued creation and distribution of such work? (p. 148)

Technically, copyright rules apply to the Internet as they do to other media. Material on the Internet belongs to the author, so its use, other than fair use, requires permission and possibly payment. However, because material on the Internet is not tangible, it is easily, freely, and privately copied. This renders it difficult, if not impossible, to police those who do copy.

Another confounding issue is that new and existing material is often combined with other existing material to create even "newer" content. This makes it difficult to assign authorship. If a user borrows

some text from one source, combines it with images from a second, surrounds both with a background graphic from a third, and adds music sampled from many others, where does authorship reside?

To deal with these thorny issues, in 1998, the US Congress passed the Digital Millennium Copyright Act. Its primary goal was to bring American copyright law into compliance with that of the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO), headquartered in Geneva, Switzerland. The act does the following:

- Makes it a crime to circumvent antipiracy measures built into commercial software
- Outlaws the manufacture, sale, or distribution of code-breaking devices used to illegally copy software
- Permits breaking of copyright protection devices to conduct encryption research and to test computer security systems
- Provides copyright exemptions for nonprofit libraries, archives, and educational institutions under certain circumstances
- Limits the copyright infringement liability of Internet service providers for simply transmitting information over the Internet, but ISPs are required to remove material from users' websites that appears to constitute copyright infringement
- Requires webcasters (those who broadcast music over the Internet) to pay licensing fees to record companies
- States explicitly that **fair use**—instances in which copyrighted material may be used without permission or payment, such as taking brief quotes from a book—applies to the Internet

What the debate over Internet copyright represents—such as concern about controlling content that children can access and efforts to limit troublesome or challenging expression— is a clash of fundamental values that has taken on added nuance with the coming of computer networks. Copyright on the Internet is discussed more fully in **Chapter 11**.

Privacy

The issue of privacy in mass communication has traditionally been concerned with individuals' rights to protect their privacy from invasive, intrusive media. For example, should newspapers publish the names of rape survivors and juvenile offenders? When does a person become a public figure and forfeit some degree of privacy? In the global village, however, the issue takes on a new character. Whereas Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis could once argue that privacy is "the right to be left alone," today privacy is just as likely to mean "the right to maintain control over our own data." Privacy in the global village has two facets. The first is protecting the privacy of communication we wish to keep private. The second is the use (and misuse) of private, personal information willingly given away online. Refer to **Chapter 11** for more on privacy.

PROTECTING PRIVACY IN COMMUNICATION

The 1986 Electronic Communications Privacy Act guarantees the privacy of our e-mail. It is a criminal offense to either "intentionally [access] without authorization a facility through which an electronic communication service is provided; or intentionally [exceed] an authorization to access that facility." In addition, the law "prohibits an electronic communications service provider from knowingly divulging the contents of any stored electronic communication." The goal of this legislation is to

protect private citizens from official abuse; it gives e-mail "conversations" the same protection that phone conversations enjoy. If a government agency wants to listen in, it must secure permission, just as it must get a court order for a telephone wiretap.

And while the 1986 act is still the law, whistle-blower Edward Snowden's 2013 revelation that the National Security Agency, in its efforts to thwart terrorism, was collecting virtually every piece of data that traveled the Internet made it clear that privacy of communication on the Internet is, at best, a hoped-for ideal. Debate has raged over whether Snowden is a hero or traitor, but no one disputes the fact that US government agencies constantly and ubiquitously track our online activity.

You may argue that this benign surveillance—computers recording what other computers are doing to look for suspicious patterns—is more beneficial than harmful; it's keeping us safe. Or you might argue, as does reporter Chris **Hedges (2014)**, that "the relationship between those who are constantly watched and tracked and those who watch and track them is the relationship between masters and slaves." In either case, as a media-literate Internet user, you should be aware of what national security reporter Robert **Sheer (2015)** calls "the great contradiction of our time: the unprecedented liberating power of the supercomputer combined with the worldwide Internet . . . also contain[s] the seeds of freedom's destruction because of the awesome power of this new technology to support a surveillance state that exceeds the wildest dream of the most ingenious dictator." This tension between ensuring our national security and protecting our personal privacy is, in the words of Amazon founder Jeff Bezos, the "issue of our age" (in **Tsukayama, 2016**).

PROTECTING PRIVACY OF PERSONAL INFORMATION

Every online act leaves a "digital trail," making possible easy **dataveillance**—the massive collection and distillation of consumer data. Ironically, we willingly participate in this intrusion into our privacy. Online marketer Shelly **Palmer (2017)** explains, "Most of us are willing to give up our data—location, viewing, purchasing, or search history—for our online enjoyment. We can call this the 'willing suspension of our privacy' because if you spent a moment to consider what your data was actually being used for, you would refuse to let it happen" (p. 18). She wants us to understand that because of computer storage, networking, and cross-referencing power, the information we willingly give to one entity is easily and cheaply given to countless unknown others.

One form of dataveillance is distributing and sharing personal, private information among organizations other than the one for whom it was originally intended. Information from every credit card transaction (online or at a store), credit application, phone call, supermarket or other purchase made without cash (for example, with a check, debit card, or "club" card), and newspaper, magazine, and cable television subscription is digitally recorded, stored, and most likely sold to others.

The increased computerization of medical files, banking information, job applications, and school records produces even more salable data. Eventually, anyone who wants to know something about a person can simply buy the necessary information—without that person's permission or even knowledge. These data can then be used to further invade people's privacy. For example, employers can withhold jobs for reasons unknown to applicants.

Recognizing the scope of data collection and the potential problems that it raises, Congress passed the 1974 Federal Privacy Act, restricting *government's* ability to collect and distribute information about citizens. The act, however, expressly exempted businesses and other nongovernmental organizations from control. As a result, Americans have become increasingly concerned about privacy and security

concerns, so much so that more than half of all Americans, 52%, have decided against using a product or service because of worries about the collection and use of their personal information (**Perrin, 2020**).

The Internet industry and the federal government responded in 2012 with a "Consumer Privacy Bill of Rights," voluntary guidelines suggesting sites place a "do not track" button on their Web pages. Critics contend that these guidelines are insufficient protection, as not all sites comply, and even those with the button may still collect and hold users' personal data for their own market research. They object to the idea that websites should provide us that security only if we specifically ask for it, called **opt-out**. "When did privacy become a choice rather than the default?" they ask. Instead, sites should have to get our permission before they collect and disseminate our personal data; that is, we should be able to **opt-in**, as is the case with the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation. Privacy advocates ask the question, "If we have legislation to bring our copyright laws into compliance with those of other nations, why shouldn't we do the same with our privacy laws?"

The state of California instituted a sweeping data privacy law on January 1, 2020. The California Consumer Privacy Act was designed to mimic the privacy protections long enjoyed by Internet users in the European Union. It mandated that businesses earning at least 50% of their annual revenue from selling consumer information must:

- Post a consent banner on their website informing consumers that their data are being collected and they have the right to opt-out;
- Give consumers the right to know what personal information is being collected from them;
- Offer users the right to ask companies to delete that information or opt-out of its collection altogether; and,
- Create a process allowing users to request all the data a company has collected on them and provide instructions on how to delete all that data.
  Because of the size of the California economy and the universality of the Internet, the hope was that in an effort to comply with the state's rules, businesses would make these requirements universal (**Ray, 2020**).

Another form of dataveillance is the electronic tracking of the choices we make when we are online, called our **click stream**. Despite the anonymity online users think they enjoy, every click of a link can be, and often is, recorded and stored. This happens whether or not the user actually enters information —for example, a credit card number to make a purchase or a Social Security number to verify identity. This tracking is made possible by **cookies**, an identifying code added to a computer's hard drive by a visited website.

Normally, only the site that has sent the cookie can read it—the next time you visit that site it "remembers" you. However, some sites bring "third-party" cookies to your computer. Maintained by big Internet advertising networks such as DoubleClick and Engage, these cookies can be read by any of the thousands of websites also belonging to that network, whether you've visited them or not, and without your knowledge. As a result, this software is more commonly referred to as **spyware**, identifying code placed on a computer by a website without permission or notification. Spyware not only facilitates tracking by unknown sites and/or people (those "third parties") but opens a computer to unwanted pop-up ads and other commercial messages.

At any given time, a regular Web user will have dozens of cookies on his or her hard drive, but commercial browsers like Chrome, Firefox, and Safari come equipped with the capacity to block or erase them. The Anti-Spyware Coalition offers information and assistance on how to deal with cookies and spyware. In addition, users can purchase cookie-scrubbing software. But with Google's announcement that starting in 2023 it would no longer allow cookies in its Chrome browser (joining Safari which had already banned them), such software may no longer be necessary. Commercial firms such as Anonymizer sell programs that not only block and erase spyware but also allow users to surf the Web anonymously.

ADDITIONAL PRIVACY THREATS

Four relatively new technological advances pose additional privacy problems: the **radio frequency identification (RFID) chip**; cloud computing; the **Internet of Things (IoT)** in which everyday objects have built-in network connectivity, allowing them to send and receive data, and **facial recognition technology**, technology capable of identifying or verifying the identity of an individual from a digital image or video source.

The first, RFID, already used by many retailers, is a grain-of-sand-size microchip and antenna embedded in consumer products that transmits a radio signal. The advantage to retailers is greater inventory control and lower labor costs. The retailer has an absolute, up-to-the-minute accounting of how many boxes of widgets are on the shelf, and consumers simply walk out the door with their boxes while the RFID sends a signal charging the correct amount to the proper credit card; no checkout personnel is needed. Privacy advocates' concern should be clear. That signal keeps on sending.

Now marketers, the government, and others will know where you and your box of widgets are at all times, how quickly you go through your box of widgets, and where you are when you run out of widgets. How soon until your e-mail's inbox fills up with offers of widgets on sale? What if a burglar could use an RFID reader from outside your house to preview its contents? What happens when these data are networked with all your other personal information? What if you buy a case of beer rather than a box of widgets? Will your employer know?

A second advance worrying privacy advocates is the growing use of cloud computing and its storage of data, including personal information, on third-party environments. Google, Microsoft, and numerous independent providers offer cloud computing, and advocates tout the increased power and memory of the cloud, arguing that even if your laptop is lost or destroyed, you lose nothing. However, privacy advocates counter that data stored online have less privacy protection both in practice and under the law.

Cloud services claim data are protected by **encryption**, the electronic coding or masking of information that can be deciphered only by a recipient with the proper decrypting key. Yet there are no guarantees, argue online privacy advocates, given repeated revelations that not only does the federal government tap into the files of Internet search engines and e-mail and cloud service providers, but many of these companies willingly provide people's data to the authorities (e.g., **Whittaker, 2020**). Privacy experts say there's simply no way to ever be completely sure your data will remain secure once you've moved them to the cloud.

Almost any everyday device we use today—consumer electronics, cars, utility meters, refrigerators, automatic coffeemakers, vending machines, thermostats, lights, clothes, and wearable devices (Pampers sells a smart baby diaper), vacuum cleaners—can be connected to the Internet. In 2017, the

number of IoT devices surpassed the number of people living on Earth (**Martin, 2017**), and by 2022 businesses and consumers annually will spend $1.1 trillion on those devices (**"Prognosis," 2020**).

If everything that exists on the Internet is linkable, IoT means that others will have access to an ever-greater array of the most personal and intimate aspects of our lives. "Think of a world where the physical location of every single item is logged and known at every single moment," suggests tech writer Jason **Rhode (2018**). "A fully realized IoT [50–100 trillion code-bearing devices] will know more about you than you know about yourself. . . . Every single action point in your physical existence has a river of data streaming from it."

Your refrigerator can alert you when you need more mustard, but it can also tell your boss that you stayed home and had a few beers while watching football rather than attending your aunt's funeral as you claimed. Your fitness tracker can measure your burned calories, but it can also tell your insurance provider that your blood pressure is rising. Your retailer's chip-bearing price tag can better track store inventory, but it can also raise the price of the shoes you want as you approach the register because it reads your up-scale zip code from the thousands of websites where you willingly provided it. Revelations such as Samsung smart TVs secretly recording private home conversations, voice assistants Alexa and Siri making recordings of everything they hear after users say their names, and reports that domestic abusers use smart-home IoT to track, monitor, and trap their victims (**Riley, 2020**) seem to confirm privacy advocates' worst IoT fears.

Finally, facial recognition technologies employ computer algorithms to identify specific, distinctive details about a person's face, such as the distance between the eyes or shape of the lips. These are then converted into a mathematical representation and compared to data on other faces collected and stored in huge facial recognition databases. A great way to catch those bad guys and a good way to shorten lines at the airport say its advocates. A very obvious risk to our right to privacy, say its opponents, not to mention to our First Amendment rights of speech and assembly (as the authorities can employ the technology at protests). Moreover, facial recognition technology is notoriously unreliable, especially with older folks and people of color, leading several localities, including Portland, Oregon, San Francisco and Oakland, California, and the state of Massachusetts to ban its use (**Hill, 2021**). Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders has called for a complete prohibition of facial recognition technology by the federal government (**Read, 2020**).

Worries over this technology are such that even tech giant Microsoft has asked for government regulation to ensure independent oversight of police and government use and to require those who employ it to post notices that facial-recognition technology is being employed in public spaces (**Harwell, 2018**).

Virtual Democracy

The Internet and social media are characterized by freedom and self-governance, which are also the hallmarks of true democracy. It is no surprise, then, that these technologies are often trumpeted as the newest and best tools for increased democratic involvement and participation. You saw in this chapter's opening pages that there was once great optimism that this would be the case: electronic technology would unite distant peoples; the Internet would give equal voice to all; America would become a country of informed citizens engaged in a political process akin to a giant teleconference.

Yet you've also seen that the Internet and social media can be used to spread hate and division, to deny people fundamental rights like privacy, to misinform and erode trust in a common good. Critics argue that the Internet will be no more of an asset to democracy than have been radio and television because the same economic and commercial forces that have shaped the content and operation of those more traditional media will constrain the Internet just as rigidly.

They point to the endless battles to keep the Internet open and free. There are frequent fights over **network neutrality** (often just called net neutrality), the requirement that all ISPs, including cable MSOs, allow free and equal flow of all Web traffic. For example, if all sites were not equal, one that was willing (and able) to pay would have its content transmitted to people's devices more quickly. Another, a political activist site for example, that was unwilling (or unable) to pay would have its content slowed down.

Their pessimism also resides in part in concentration and conglomeration of the Internet– Google's acquisition of massively popular YouTube; Microsoft's purchase of Internet video phone company Skype and social networking sites LinkedIn and Yammer; Facebook's purchase of Instagram and WhatsApp; Yahoo!'s purchase of blogging service Tumblr and its later acquisition by Verizon; and AT&T's merger with DirecTV and its efforts to acquire Time Warner, to list a few.

Still, optimism for the Internet, especially social media, persists. For example, while granting that each of his seven "things that social media can do for democracy" has a dark side, Ethan **Zuckerman (2018)** of the Center for Civic Media argues that, on the whole, they can serve democracy well. You'll no doubt recognize evidence of these benefits in what you've already read in this chapter. Social media, he argues, inform us; amplify important voices and issues; serve as tools for connection and solidarity; are spaces for mobilization; are forums for deliberation and debate; show us a diversity of views and perspectives; and can serve as models for democratically governed spaces.

THE TECHNOLOGY GAP

If the civic promise of the Internet is to be fulfilled, the basic tenet of democracy–one person, one vote –must be met. But if democracy is increasingly practiced online, those lacking the necessary technology and skill will be denied their vote. This is the **technology gap**–the widening disparity between the communication technology haves and have-nots. The "democratization" of the Internet still favors those who have the money to buy the equipment needed to access the Internet as well as to pay for that connection. This leaves out many US citizens–those on the wrong side of the **digital divide**, the lack of technological access among specific groups of Americans. To be offline means exclusion from opportunities to learn, earn a living, access important services, and participate fully in democracy.

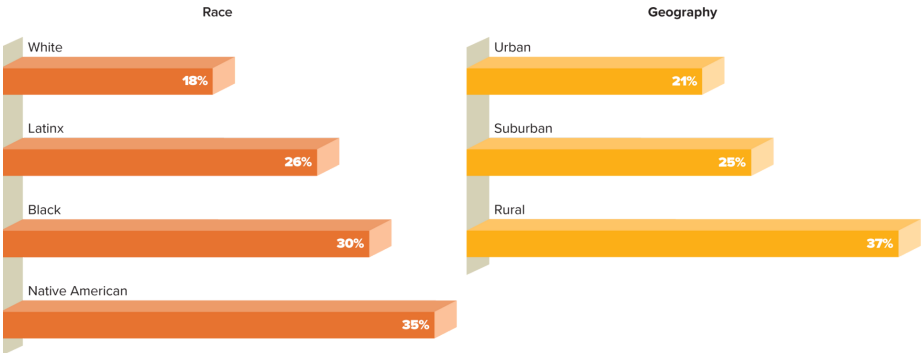


◂ This Internet-connected smart refrigerator can tell you when you need more mustard, but it can also tell your insurance company you eat a lot of ice cream.

Alex Wong/Getty Images

Although the vast majority of Americans regularly access the Internet, 7% do not (**Perrin & Atske, 2021**). Making matters worse, nearly a quarter of the population does not have access to broadband or other high-speed Internet at home (**Perrin, 2021**). These deficiencies fall heaviest on those less educated, people with disabilities, those with lower incomes, those in rural areas, Hispanic and African American households, and less affluent elderly people.

The digital divide was never more clear than during the 2020 coronavirus pandemic as "schooling, jobs, government services, medical care, and child care that once were performed in person have been turned over to the web, exposing a deep rift between the broadband haves and have-nots," explained the *New York Times* ("The Limits," 2020, p. SR10). You can see how the divide played out with children from different demographic groups in **Figure 13.2**, and you can weigh in on the debate surrounding the necessity of access to broadband in the box, "Is High-Speed Internet a Human Right?"



▲ **Figure 13.2** Percentage of K-12 Students Without Adequate Internet or Devices to Sustain Effective Distance Learning at Home.

Source: ***Chandra et al., 2020***.

DEVELOPING MEDIA LITERACY SKILLS

The Internet Bill of Rights

The first 10 Amendments to the United States Constitution are the Bill of Rights, so named because they spell out the Founders' belief that people, by simple virtue of their humanity, are entitled to certain guaranteed, "unalienable" (unable to be taken away) rights. Given the Internet's importance to virtually all aspects of human endeavor, many people believe that it should be treated as a basic human right.

This is the philosophy that moved US House of Representatives member from California Ro Khanna to present a bill to Congress in 2019 that would enshrine an Internet Bill of Rights into law. As Tim Berners-Lee, who helped craft the bill, explained, "If the internet is to live up to its potential as a force for good in the world, we need safeguards that ensure fairness, openness, and human dignity. This Bill of Rights provides a set of principles that are about giving users more control of their online lives while creating a healthier internet economy" (in **Swisher, 2018**, p. SR9). It reads, *You should have the right*:

1. *to have access to and knowledge of all collection and uses of personal data by companies;* Page 369
2. *to opt-in consent to the collection of personal data by any party and to the sharing of personal data with a third party;*
3. *where context is appropriate and with a fair process, to obtain, correct or delete personal data controlled by any company and to have those requests honored by third parties;*
4. *to have personal data secured and to be notified in a timely manner when a security breach or unauthorized access of personal data is discovered;*
5. *to move all personal data from one network to the next;*
6. *to access and use the Internet without Internet service providers blocking, throttling, engaging in paid prioritization or otherwise unfairly favoring content, applications, services or devices;*
7. *to Internet service without the collection of data that is unnecessary for providing the requested service absent opt-in consent;*
8. *to have access to multiple viable, affordable Internet platforms, services and providers with clear and transparent pricing;*
9. *not to be unfairly discriminated against or exploited based on your personal data; and*
10. *to have an entity that collects your personal data have reasonable business practices and accountability to protect your privacy.*

As the Internet, the World Wide Web, and social media increasingly become necessities and even life-sustaining utilities, media-literate users have an obligation to know and defend these fundamental communication freedoms.

It is important to remember that culture is neither innate nor inviolate. *We* construct culture—both dominant and bounded. Increasingly, we do so through mass communication, and the Internet has given us voice once unimaginable. So before we can enter the forum in which those

cultures are constructed and maintained, we must understand where we stand and what we believe. We must be able to defend our positions. The hallmarks of a media-literate individual are analysis and self-reflection. Reread the Internet Bill of Rights. After having read this chapter's discussion of privacy, freedom of expression, fake news and deep fakes, the digital divide, net neutrality, and municipal broadband, how well do you think they are being met?

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Fake News—Chapter 14

About This Chapter

Imagine this: a famous advocate of human rights, a political optimist known for his support of women's equality and the rights of ethnic minorities, publishes a book in which he argues for the importance of a free press. In response, the president of the United States comments that most of what the news media does is spread lies. Which president said that? If you guessed Donald Trump, you'd be. . . wrong. In fact, you'd be wrong by over two hundred years. The president in question was John Adams, writing in 1798 in response to a treatise by the Marquis de Cordorcet. "There has been more new error propagated by the press in the last ten years," Adams wrote, "than in an hundred years before 1798."[1] Adams' anger with the press is only one example of the very long history of political dissatisfaction with the spread of false news stories. While we can debate whether Adams was justified in his complaints, the truth is that what we now call "fake news" goes back much further than the early days of the United States.



▼ *image courtesy National Gallery of Art*

If we think of fake news as disinformation—and don't worry, we'll be spending more time on the definition of fake news—then we can trace its history back thousands of years. In 1274 BCE, for example, Egyptian Pharaoh **Ramesses II** famously declared to his people that he had won the Battle of Kadesh against the Hittites, when in truth he had been forced to retreat. In 44 BCE, a fierce propaganda war was waged between Roman emperor **Octavian** and his political rival, **Mark Antony**. Octavian spread false stories about Antony and his lover, Egyptian ruler Cleopatra, and may even have created a fake will to suggest that Antony was a traitor. After the invention of the printing press and the subsequent rise of newspapers, disinformation became a much more common and easily spread fact of life. In 1835, New York newspaper *The Sun* printed a series of articles claiming that a powerful new telescope had allowed scientists to verify the existence of extensive and fantastical life on the moon. Although what is now referred to as "**The Great Moon Hoax**" was eventually revealed to be fabricated, the stories established *The Sun* as a popular

newspaper. Adolph Hitler used extensive propaganda and deception in his rise to power in Germany in the 1930s, and disinformation has only become more common as a tool of both governments and businesses in the decades since. “In short, the faking of news stories has been around for a long time, and every iteration of technological advancement, from the telegraph in the 19th century to contemporary social media algorithms, has unleashed new possibilities of deception and fabrication.”[2]

The purpose of this chapter is to explore the concept of fake news, and to answer important questions about it. What exactly do we mean when we say “fake news?” Is fake news really a problem? And what can and should we do to deal with it?

WHAT TO FOCUS ON

Focus on the entire chapter.

What Is Fake News

Of all the many difficult words and phrases that we'll deal with in this book, perhaps the most challenging is "fake news." Not only is the phrase hard to define—one of the sources I'll be referencing later in the chapter is a study of thirty-four different academic definitions of the term—but it is also a subject of intense political disagreement. Part of the reason it's important to study fake news, however, is precisely because it is the source of such intense political and social focus, and because it is something about which so many people disagree. The term's importance to our culture and our time is reflected in the amount of energy we devote to talking (and arguing) about it.

If we think of fake news in terms of how the phrase gets used in common parlance, there is even more cause for confusion. People say "fake news" when describing at least six different things:

- News stories that are intentionally misleading
- Comedy that parodies or satirizes the actual news, like *The Daily Show* or *The Onion*
- News stories that are unacceptably partisan or otherwise biased
- Misleading news stories written or funded by corporations for the purposes of advertising
- Reporting that contains factual errors
- Anything published that the person speaking dislikes or disagrees with

Hopefully by now you know not to ask which one of these definitions is the "correct" one. The phrase "fake news" is associated with all of these meanings (and more), so from a certain point of view they are all correct. At the same time, each of these meanings is distinct, so it seems important for us to sort out what definition of fake news we're going to use when we discuss it. Edson C. Tandoc, Jr. led a team of communication scholars who studied thirty-four different academic definitions of fake news published over the course of nearly fifteen years. They found that:

> What is common across these definitions is how fake news appropriates the look and feel of real news; from how websites look; to how articles are written; to how photos include attributions. Fake news hides under a veneer of legitimacy as it takes on some form of credibility by trying to appear like real news. Furthermore, going beyond the simple appearance of a news item, through the use of news bots, fake news imitates news' omnipresence by building a network of fake sites.[3]

In other words, part of what makes something fake news is an attempt to take information that is illegitimate and give it the appearance of legitimacy by making it seem as much as possible like traditional news reporting.



▲ *Georgejmclittle/Shutterstock*

Dr. Tandoc's conclusion tells us something important about fake news, but a good definition requires more detail. After all, comedy sites like *The Onion* provide their readers with a veneer of legitimacy by trying to appear like real news, but in their case it's all part of the joke. Are they fake news? There certainly are many articles from a number of years ago that apply the phrase to parody and satire, but the national (and even international) concern over the rise of fake news hardly seems to be about whether *Saturday Night Live*'s "Weekend Update" is funny this season. The definition of **fake news** we will use was formulated by philosophy professor and social cognition scholar Regina Rini:

> A fake news story is one that purports to describe events in the real world, typically by mimicking the conventions of traditional media reportage, yet is known by its creators to be significantly false, and is transmitted with the two goals of being widely re-transmitted and of deceiving at least some of its audience.[4]

This definition describes the heart of the fake news controversy with a fair amount of precision. It includes several different elements that are worth highlighting. First, fake news claims to describe real events. This distinguishes it from pure comedy—even comedy that makes use of news formats. Second, in keeping with Tandoc's conclusions, fake news mimics the forms of traditional news reporting. Third, those who create fake news are aware that it is at least partially false. This differentiates fake news from partisanship and reporting that is simply mistaken. Finally, the goal of fake news is to deceive. Articles that are written as parody or commentary are not fake news if they are not intended to deceive their audience. The point of fake news is to spread false information, and to convince people that inaccurate things are true. Tandoc points out that fake news is therefore a kind of **disinformation** (deliberate sharing of false information) as opposed to **misinformation** (unintentional sharing of false information).[5] This means that fake news includes wholly fabricated articles disseminated by people who intend to hurt us and our society. But it also means that fake news includes fabricated articles that are meant to help sell products, as well as some forms of comedic "news" that are created with the hope that some readers will think they are true. In other words, as long as the motivation of the author is to deceive, it doesn't matter what their other motivations are. The resulting publications are still fake news.

Unfortunately, even after we establish a clear definition of fake news, things are still complicated. Journalism is a multifaceted industry, and individual reports or stories can contain references to multiple perspectives. Part of the power of fake news is its ability to make its way into the mainstream press. Let's imagine that I decide to write a fake news article claiming that drinking radish milk will cure male pattern baldness. Radish milk has no impact on male pattern baldness, but I own a large radish farm and I'm trying to boost sales. I create a fake news site that contains an article about this new miracle cure. A reporter for a respectable newspaper sees it and decides to interview me for an article about male pattern baldness. The article notes that my claims have no scientific backing, but now my fake news story has at least been mentioned in a real newspaper. A national television news program invites me to take part in a panel about false health claims. The other people on the show all point out that I'm a con man, but I spend all my time on the show screaming about how Big Pharma just doesn't want people to know about the power of radishes. My sales go through the roof, and in my new marketing materials I say that my cure has been covered by both the newspaper and the television news show. My original article was clearly fake news, but what about the newspaper article that reported on me? What about the television show? In both cases, the journalists arguably did what they were supposed to do by reminding the audience that I'm a liar. But they also gave me publicity. The very act of talking about my lies helped spread those lies. My example is made up—I'm pretty sure that "radish milk" isn't real—but the dynamic it describes happens all the time.[6] Fake news makes its way into more legitimate journalistic channels in all sorts of ways. Sometimes journalists report on the scandal caused by the fake news, sometimes they treat the fake news as just one of many competing perspectives on an issue, and sometimes they subtly support disinformation by allowing fake news proponents to make their claims without refutation or response. There are even examples of members of news organizations choosing to help spread fake news because it furthers their ideology. In most cases, the individual actions of journalists in this dynamic aren't examples of fake news, but they *are* examples of how fake news can have broad-reaching impacts even if initial fake news stories don't reach a very big audience. It's probably best to think of fake news as a continuum, with original fake news reports and articles being on the "very fake" end of the spectrum and articles that just mention fake news being on the "less fake" end of that spectrum.

A New Era of Fake News

How Did Fake News Grow?

I have been teaching this media literacy course for over twenty years, so I'm used to change. When I first started teaching this class, for example, we used to talk about whether Amazon would ever make a profit as a company. Now Jeff Bezos owns my whole life, and Amazon's annual profits are approaching $500 billion.

But even that kind of transformation pales in comparison to what has happened in the world of fake news in the last few years.

Four years ago, when we first put together a custom textbook for this course, we were asking questions like "is fake news bad?" and "how much fake news is there, really?" We no longer ask those questions. The issue of fake news has gone from being a minor concern to an enormous issue that defines our domestic politics and has global consequences. How did we get from those sunny, innocent days of wondering whether fake news was something we should worry about to. . . well. . . now? Scholars will be trying to answer that question for decades to come, but there are three events that most prominently contributed to the growth of our concern about fake news: the election of Donald Trump in 2016, his loss to Joe Biden in 2020, and the arrival of the COVID-19 virus.

Before the 2016 presidential election, fake news was a phrase only really uttered by media scholars. However, as Donald Trump's campaign gained steam and the day of the 2016 election approached, we found ourselves inundated by "news" stories that were not just mistaken but clearly fraudulent. Many of these stories seemed to originate in Russia, leading to an enormous scandal that would culminate in the first of two impeachments for President Trump. But before all that happened, there was an election —the first American presidential election in which fake news played a large part. How large a part did fake news play in that election? "An estimated 126 million Americans, roughly one-third of the nation's population, received Russian-backed content on Facebook during the 2016 campaign."[7] Furthermore, many fake news stories received comparably more attention than legitimate news. In the months before the election, the top twenty fake news stories had more shares, likes, and comments on Facebook than the top twenty legitimate news stories.[8] But what does all of that really tell us? Did fake news change the outcome of the election? It's possible to imagine fake news having an impact. If fake news convinces probable voters to stay home and not vote at all, for example, or if it motivates unlikely voters to go to the polls and cast a vote, then it can influence elections without having to change opinions about candidates at all.

One of the most exhaustive studies conducted on the 2016 election so far was helmed by Kathleen Hall Jamieson, one of America's foremost experts on presidential communication and election dynamics. She ultimately determined that it is not possible to know with certainty whether Russian disinformation changed the outcome of the 2016 presidential election. However, she also concluded:

> If the same sorts of effects that scholars have documented in past elections occurred in 2016, particularly those produced by agenda setting, framing, two-step flow, weighting and peer influence, then the trolls' messaging helped Trump and hurt Clinton as well. We do not know whether it was well enough targeted to change the outcome. But the likelihood exists. The notion that they contributed to his win is fortified by the fact that their theory of his electoral needs was sound, their messaging was sufficiently adept and extensive enough to matter, and their themes aligned with those of his campaign.[9]



▲ *Shutterstock/Evan El-Amin*

In other words, while we may never be able to say with certainty whether fake news altered the 2016 election, we can say that if all the dynamics scholars have previously documented in presidential elections worked the same way they usually do, it's likely that fake news did have an impact.

It's intriguing and exciting (if also a bit terrifying) to realize that fake news might have played a decisive role in an American presidential election. However, it wasn't the 2016 election process itself that cemented the link between Donald Trump and fake news. Even before its official beginning, Trump's presidency fueled the growth of fake news in several ways. First, Trump was extremely fond of the phase "fake news." He used it over 2,000 times during his presidency,[10] most often to denigrate press reports he didn't like or statements by his opponents that he didn't agree with. Trump's fascination with the term led to its adoption by many of his spokespeople and supporters, as well as by the press and even his opponents. But more importantly, Trump fueled the growth of fake news by doing one thing, over and over again: lying. Politicians of all political persuasions have historically had a very loose relationship with the truth, but Trump took this tendency to a new level. In his four years in office, The Washington Post documented over 30,000 statements by Trump that were false or misleading.[11] Trump lied about such a large range of issues, and with such regularity, that his supporters couldn't just shrug his lies off as innocent mistakes or a tendency toward exaggeration. At the time, right-wing media was experiencing unprecedented success. Trump was a big fan of conservative news, especially Fox News, and his relationship with the network and its employees was incredibly close. Trump frequently appointed Fox News employees to important posts in the federal government, and Trump loyalists who left the government often went to work for Fox. Furthermore, Trump took many of his political cues and policy guidance directly from Fox News personalities, overriding the advice of his aides when Fox personalities criticized it.[12] Trump even reportedly made a habit of talking to Fox News personality Sean Hannity every night before bed.[13] The White House and Fox News were tightly intertwined. Trump was influenced by comments and reports on Fox, and the network increasingly saw itself as part of Trump's administration. Therefore, when Trump said something false or misleading, Fox often rushed in to defend the president's statements as though they

were true. Other conservative media outlets followed suit, and a new era of fake news was born—one in which many right-leaning news outlets saw it as their job to defend false statements as a sort of ideological litmus test. Defending Trump, regardless of what he said, was the only reliable proof of your conservatism.



▼ *LPETTET/E+/Getty Images*

The second event that contributed to the rise of fake news as an issue in the United States was Donald Trump's loss to Joe Biden in the 2020 presidential election. As many scholars have noted, the Republican party in the United States has been voicing its concern over the prospect of voter fraud for many years. This has been true in spite of overwhelming evidence that voter fraud is almost nonexistent. "Even the comprehensive database compiled by the conservative Heritage Foundation demonstrates that voter impersonation fraud (the type of fraud that would be prevented by voter IDs) almost never occurs. Of the 1,311 cases of voter fraud between 1979 and 2021 documented on the Heritage site, only 13 were cases of voter impersonation fraud."[14] Trump weaponized this fear of nonexistent election fraud, falsely claiming that millions of unauthorized immigrant voters participated in the 2016 presidential election—which Trump won. Trump and members of his administration began questioning the results of the November 2020 election as early as April—seven months before it even took place.[15] Trump focused in particular on the idea that mail-in ballots, a form of voting with an impeccable record of security and accuracy, would be used to steal the election from him. On election night, Trump declared that he had won the election, in spite of the fact that ballots in many key states were still in the early stages of being counted. This led to protests and other forms of political action at many ballot-counting sites by Trump supporters. Four nights later, multiple media outlets reported accurately that Biden had won the election. Trump and his supporters launched a full-scale judicial assault on the election, filing 62 lawsuits. His lawyers were successful in only one of those 62 suits, and that particular suit had no impact on the results of any election. Judges of all political persuasions ruled against Trump's claims. At the federal level, the vast majority of judges who decided against him were appointed by Republican presidents.[16] Undeterred, Trump and his supporters developed what is

now commonly known as "the Big Lie"—the contention that Joe Biden did not win the 2020 presidential election legitimately, and that Trump was the real winner.

It is important to begin this discussion by noting that there are so many different versions of the Big Lie that it is impossible to discuss them all. Some of them are based on simple misunderstandings of voting statistics or election procedures, while others involve conspiracy theories so byzantine that they defy explanation. The common thread in every version of the Big Lie is that they are all false. They are fake news, not just in the pejorative sense of the term, but in the narrower definition we have presented here. There is not only no evidence of widespread or systemic voter fraud in the 2020 presidential election, there is overwhelming evidence that the election was safe, secure, and professionally conducted. The many claims of the Big Lie have been thoroughly debunked,[17] and every claim by Trump loyalists that they have new and conclusive evidence of fraud has turned out to be false. Nevertheless, belief among Republicans in the Big Lie has been resilient. "More than two-thirds of Republicans believe it. For those who watch Fox News, that number is 82%. For consumers of far-right news—think Newsmax and OAN—that number reaches near universal belief, at 97%."[18] Furthermore, these numbers have stayed roughly the same since just after the 2020 election. Not only is this conviction strong, for a majority of Republicans belief in the Big Lie is important to what it means to be a Republican.[19] In other words, we now have a major political party for whom belief in fake news is central to their identity, *and* we have a large section of the news industry devoted to producing fake news.

The final event that defined this new era of fake news was the arrival of COVID-19. The novel coronavirus appeared in very late 2019 and dominated the news in 2020. The first confirmed case in the United States happened on January 21, and by March the disease constituted a global pandemic. Nearly 400,000 Americans died from the virus in 2020 alone, as all levels of government struggled to determine how best to respond. From the beginning, the Trump administration had a mixed reaction to the crisis. Trump signed major legislation funding a response to the outbreak, and was a vocal champion of Operation Warp Speed, a public-private partnership designed to speed up vaccine development. However, he was also prone to making false or misleading statements downplaying the extent of the pandemic. In January, he said the virus was under control. In February he said it would soon disappear. In March he said it would just go away. In April he suggested masks weren't necessary and spoke confusingly at a press conference about the possibility of using bleach to treat the virus.[20] The conservative press took their cues from him, and soon networks like Fox were expressing doubt not only about the right way to handle the virus, but about whether it was a serious issue at all. Fox personalities consistently likened COVID to the seasonal flu and described the concern about growing deaths from the virus was manufactured hysteria. Most importantly, various Fox shows described the virus as a political maneuver designed to damage Trump's presidency or even somehow impeach him.[21] Meanwhile, members of the Trump administration were actively looking for models of the pandemic that were more optimistic than the ones they were being given by scientists.[22] The Trump administration's desire to avoid political fallout from a historic pandemic merged with right-wing media's desire to support Trump's public doubts about the virus, and press coverage of a nonpartisan disease became deeply partisan and often profoundly inaccurate and misleading.

The COVID-19 crisis has produced a truly shocking amount of fake news about a dizzying array of topics, from denial of the risks posed by the virus to reports that advocate "cures" that do nothing to treat the disease to false concern about the vaccines. "The misleading information about the disease is coming from diverse sources including politicians, world leaders, celebrities, prominent public figures,

conspiracy theorists and even the general public. As a result, the World Health Organization has declared an 'infodemic' of misleading information about the COVID-19, which poses a serious risk for public health."[23] This infodemic is having a huge impact on Americans. A recent study presented people with 8 false statements about COVID. 78% of respondents report that for at least one of the false statements, they either believe it or aren't sure that it is false. Nearly one-third of adults believe in (or aren't sure about) at least four of the false statements. 60% of adults either think the government is exaggerating the number of COVID deaths or aren't sure if that's true. That number is highly polarized, with only about one-third of Democrats doubting COVID mortality numbers, but 84% of Republicans suspecting that the government is lying to them about COVID deaths. What is notable about fake news surrounding COVID is that it marks the first time we have seen the partisan fake news dynamic make its way into an issue that has nothing to do with electoral politics. We have now truly entered a new era of fake news, where any issue can become a flashpoint of partisan politics, leveraging the dynamic between the Republican party and the right-wing news industry to generate widespread fake news stories regardless of whether the subject matter is part of traditional politics or not.



▼ *Sneksy/Getty Images*

How Does Fake News Spread?

Where does fake news come from? To be honest, we are still in the very beginning stages of answering that question. What we have so far is part of an answer. First, we know that a great deal of fake news that gets shared in the United States originates in Russia and China. "Russian and Chinese English language news appear to be manipulated to promote certain narratives—particularly ones that promote Russian and Chinese geopolitical interests at the expense of the United States. They also appear to promote a variety of different conspiracy theories, especially those that portray the pandemic as an opportunity for governments and elites to take advantage of citizens and those that cast doubt on the origin of COVID-19."[24] Russian disinformation campaigns designed to alter the outcome of elections in the U.S. and elsewhere are well documented. However, it would be a mistake to believe that all or

even most of the fake news we see in the U.S. comes from foreign sources. As we have already discussed, the right-wing news industry is increasingly prone to producing reports that are not merely mistaken, but that actually qualify as fake news. We know, for example, that all of the Fox News personalities who gave on-air reports questioning the safety of the COVID vaccines were required by Fox to be vaccinated.[25] We also know that a number of very prominent right-wing journalists and commentators who defended the legitimacy of the January 2021 insurrection tried to contact President Trump to persuade him to do more to stop the violence before and during the events of January 6.[26] Elected political leaders have been caught buying stock in companies that produced COVID tests and protective materials while making public statements to their constituents that virus was not a threat. Fake news can also come from a relatively small group of individuals with their own personal agendas. The Center for Countering Digital Hate, for example, studied anti-vaccine fake news stories and discovered that 65% of that content could be traced back to the activities of just 12 people.[27] In the end, however, we don't have a comprehensive answer to the question of where fake news comes from. What we do know is that there is more of it circulating in the world than ever before.

We know considerably more about how fake news spreads once it's been created. Studies have confirmed that false stories spread online much more quickly than true stories, and "although recent testimony before congressional committees on misinformation in the United States has focused on the role of bots in spreading false news. . . human behavior contributes more to the differential spread of falsity and truth than automated robots do."[28]

People have a tendency to want to participate in and know more about popular issues, which makes social media an especially likely place for fake news to spread. "When a post is accompanied by many likes, shares, or comments, it is more likely to receive attention by others, and therefore more likely to be further liked, shared, or commented on. Popularity on social media is thus a self-fulfilling cycle"[29] There are other factors that make it more likely someone will share fake news on social media. One of the best-documented such factors involves political beliefs. "[A]cross multiple studies a positive association has emerged between conservative political ideology and dissemination of falsities." These studies tell us that conservatives frequent web sites that are more likely to contain fake news and that conservatives are more prone to believing conspiracy theories.[30] So many studies have linked political conservatism to an increased tendency to spread fake news, that some observers have concluded that conservatives are just "naturally" more likely to disseminate fake news. However, "such a conclusion runs the risk of denigrating all conservatives,"[31] and of misunderstanding the nuances of the spread of fake news. Research demonstrates that additional factors are at work in the link between political conservatism and fake news. First, it appears that what drives the tendency to post fake news is not political ideology by itself. In a study of over 4,500 participants of many different political persuasions, there was no difference between liberals and conservatives in terms of their willingness to spread fake news—as long as they were also conscientious. In other words, conservatives who follow social norms and rules aren't any more likely to share fake news than liberals who also follow norms and rules. The group of people who "drive differences in the spread of misinformation across party lines" are those who are politically conservative but who also lack conscientiousness. The study determined that these individuals are "motivated not only by vehemently promoting the interests of their group, but also by denigrating other rival groups."[32] This "desire for chaos" leads individuals to be more willing to risk the negative consequences of spreading false information.

There is another factor that influences the tendency of political conservatives to spread fake news. A major study followed a large group of people for six months, measuring their beliefs about various political claims over that period. The researchers found that conservatives were less able to discriminate between political truths and falsehoods than liberals. However, the researchers *also* found that the reason for this difference had to do with the nature of the political claims circulating in the world of news. It turns out that "high-profile true political claims tend to promote issues and candidates favored by liberals, while falsehoods tend to be better for conservatives."[33] In other words, conservatives tend to believe in fake news, not because they are inherently worse than liberals at distinguishing reality from falsehoods, but because so many public arguments being made by conservative politicians and commentators are false. Conservatives are driven to spread fake news because they are loyal to their political party, not because they can't tell the difference between reality and fiction. The authors conclude that if conservative political leaders and right-leaning news organizations told the truth more often, "misperceptions among conservatives would likely decline."[34] This might seem like an unlikely prospect, but it's important to remember how quickly things have changed in terms of the relationship between conservative politics, conservative media, and fake news. If this dynamic formed so quickly and so recently, then perhaps it can be altered with a similar speed.

Once fake news reaches us, we are shockingly likely to believe it. On average, Americans tend to believe fake news about 75% of the time, with Democrats getting fooled 71% of the time and Republicans 84% of the time.[35] Furthermore, the more often we are exposed to an individual fake news story the more likely we are to believe it is true, regardless of whether the story conforms to our pre-existing political beliefs. Repeated exposure to a fake news article is so persuasive that it can overcome warnings that an article has been disputed by fact-checking organizations.[36] So even when fake news is not all that common, it is still potentially dangerous. One of the reasons this is true has to do with what's called the third-person effect (remember **Chapter 1**?). The third-person effect is the tendency of individuals to believe that they are not influenced by media, even though others are. When it comes to fake news, research has demonstrated that exposure to social media actually increases the third-person effect. In other words, participating in social media makes us more likely to believe that we are immune to fake news, even as we recognize that others are being impacted by it. This is particularly concerning because of the common assumption that the Internet enables us to become more informed and therefore avoid falling victim to fake news. However, it appears that social media in particular only makes us *feel* better informed, which actually increases the likelihood that we will fall victim to fake news.[37]

Fake News Concerns

The dangers of fake news can be grouped into several different categories. First, fake news creates challenges for the already beleaguered profession of journalism. At a time when public trust in the media has suffered a precipitous decline,[38] the phenomenon of fake news can cause even more problems for journalists. Fake news damages faith in journalism merely by existing, as consumers become aware that they can't necessarily trust information just because it comes packaged in a familiar news format. As more of us become aware of fake news as a concept, it is also easy for bad actors to demonize the press as a whole, shouting "fake news!" whenever a particular report (or reporter, or news organization) publishes something they don't agree with politically. When he was the president, Donald Trump created a great deal of controversy by using the concept of fake news as the basis for

calling the news media "the true enemy of the people."[39] This is deeply concerning, since political extremists have targeted media personalities and organizations for threats of violence and even actual bombs. A recent United Nations reports documents "a surge in online violence against journalists, which disproportionately impacts female journalists. The UN found that 70% of female journalists globally have experienced online violence, while 20% of female journalists have experience real-world violence that was a direct result of online threats.[40]

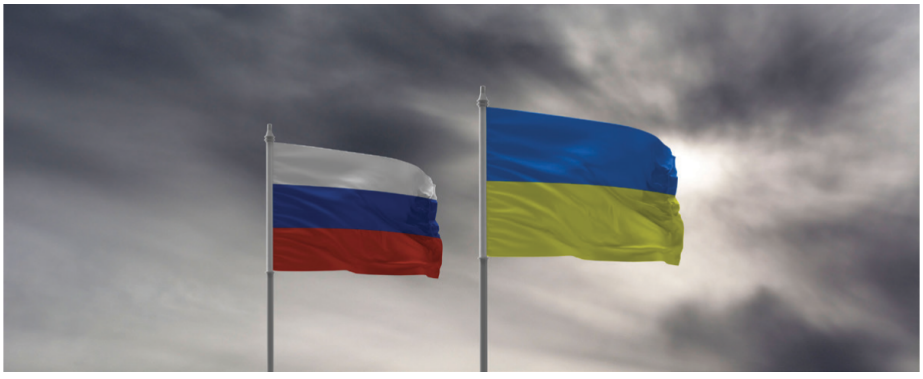
While not as disturbing as the potential for violence, fake news can also damage journalists by influencing what they report about. One measure of the "success" of fake news is how much it can change the focus and direction of the larger media environment. Communication professor and digital advertising scholar Chris Vargo conducted a big data analysis of the impact of fake news on mainstream media. He found that, while fake news did not have much of an impact on the nonpartisan press, it had a substantial impact on the partisan press. From 2014 to 2016, 75% of the issues he isolated in the partisan press were being driven by fake news.[41] Weakening the quality and influence of journalism damages democracy and is a worrisome impact of fake news given how much of it is being generated by autocratic nations like Russia and China. Many critics worry that fake news is becoming a major threat to democracy on a global scale.

The second danger of fake news is the way it can promote social conflict and even violence. "Stories that are untrue and that intentionally mislead readers have caused growing mistrust among American people. In some cases this mistrust results in incivility, protest over imaginary events, or violence. This unravels the fabric of American life, turning neighbor against neighbor."[42] Perhaps the most famous example of this sort of social conflict is the strange case of "Pizzagate." In 2016, fabricated reports appeared on Twitter that leaders of the Democratic Party were involved in a pedophilia ring. When Wikileaks disseminated illegally obtained emails from the Democratic National Committee, various groups on conspiracy sites claimed that Clinton campaign assistant John Podesta's email contained code words for human trafficking, pedophilia, and even Satanic rituals. Some proponents of the conspiracy claimed that ground zero for this nonexistent sex slave ring was an obscure pizza restaurant in Washington, DC. On December, 4, a North Carolina man decided to take matters into his own hands. He entered the pizza parlor armed with an AR-15 assault rifle in hopes of rescuing the children, but all he found was pizza. He did fire his weapon at some point while in the restaurant, but ultimately surrendered to the police and no one was hurt.[43] Sadly, history is replete with other examples of violent confrontations inspired by fake news that did not end so peacefully. The infamous "blood libel" conspiracy theory against Jews in Italy, perpetrated in 1475 by officials of the Catholic church, resulted in countless tortures and at least fifteen deaths. In the United States prior to the Civil War, widespread false news stories of slave uprisings and criminal activities by slaves "led to terrible violence against African-Americans."[44] In the last few years, violence inspired by fake news has plagued India,[45] France,[46] Nigeria,[47] and Myanmar,[48] as well as the United States.

On January 6, 2021, a large crowd of supporters of then-president Trump stormed the U.S. Capitol Building in an attempt to interrupt the peaceful transfer of power from Trump's administration to that of president-elect Joe Biden. By their own accounts, as well as those of multiple reports and investigations, this group of people was motivated by the belief that the November 2020 election had been stolen from Trump—a belief supported by fake news from multiple sources including Trump himself. Some members of the crowd set up a makeshift gallows outside the Capitol, chanting "Hang Mike Pence"—the vice president whose job it was to certify the results of the electoral college and thus oversee the transfer of power. Eventually, at least 1,000 people breached the Capitol itself, some

roaming the halls looking for Democratic lawmakers, others taking trophies, carrying the Confederate flag, and damaging property. Over 140 police officers were injured, and five people died, including one member of the group that forced their way into the Capitol Building. The insurrection spurred an enormous investigation by the Department of Justice and resulted in a historic second impeachment for then-president Trump. The runup to and the fallout from the insurrection have also produced threats of violence and actual violence against election workers and others involved with election administration. Fake news is highly correlated with racial and religious bigotry. Fake news seems most dangerous when it encourages already existing racial and religious tensions.

The third danger posed by fake news seems simple: it gives people inaccurate information. But inaccurate information can have profound impacts in multiple spheres of human activity. We have already seen that fake news has the potential to change the outcomes of elections by giving people bad information and by impacting their desire to vote at all. Research also indicates that fake news can have negative impacts on stock prices, as markets react to the inaccurate information provided by fake news. Furthermore, once the fake news is debunked, financial markets don't necessarily correct their initial reactions. In other words, fake news can trick investors into reacting negatively, and even after the trick has been revealed, investors don't fully recover from the false information they were given.[49] The inaccurate information communicated by fake news can damage all sorts of industries, including tourism,[50] agriculture, cosmetics, coffee, and many others.[51] One study estimated the global economic costs of fake news at $78 billion annually.[52] But inaccurate information can have impacts that are more concerning than a loss of money. The COVID-19 crisis has highlighted the dangers of giving people bad information about how to safeguard their health. International research demonstrates that belief in fake news about COVID reduces the likelihood that people will do things like get vaccinated, wear masks, and take other precautions against contracting the virus.[53] Specifically, there is a direct correlation between the percentage of people who watch Fox News in a given area and the likelihood those people will ignore public health advice about COVID.[54] The impact of these tendencies is not merely theoretical. A recent long-term analysis revealed that people who believed false information about the virus (and who distrusted science in general) were more likely to contract COVID than those who had better information about the pandemic.[55]



▼ *Svetlana Turchenick/ Shutterstock*

Giving people inaccurate information can also impact how government functions. The fact that fake news was so successful following the 2020 election in convincing people that there had been widespread voting fraud has led to countless new laws designed to make it harder for people to vote. Conservative lawmakers have used the inaccurate belief that voting fraud is a major problem to target

groups of people who are more likely to vote for Democratic candidates, such as minority voters and young voters. These laws have also had the broader effect of making it harder for everyone to vote, as they have often restricted more convenient ways of voting like mail-in voting and drop-box voting. The false belief that public schools are teaching K-12 students "Critical Race Theory"—a relatively obscure academic perspective only taught in a few law schools—has led to numerous state and local laws restricting what teachers can say in classrooms. Increasingly, fake news is being weaponized to attack political opponents, often with accusations that are plainly ridiculous. Vladimir Putin's regime in Russia has used relentless and false reports that Ukraine is being run by Nazis—the president of Ukraine at the time of the invasion was Jewish—to justify its 2022 invasion of the country and to motivate its soldiers to commit acts of brutality. Supreme Court Justice Katanji Brown Jackson, the first Black woman to become a member of the Supreme Court, was baselessly accused of being sympathetic to pedophiles and drug dealers by her political opponents. There has been a long history of fake news being used to justify political decisions, from false "science" funded by tobacco companies that "proved" cigarettes don't cause cancer, to inaccurate and misleading studies funded by energy companies that cast doubt on the reality of climate change. Since we have entered this new era, however, fake news has become a regular and even normalized part of our political discourse, risking profound damage to the functioning of our democracy.

Focus on Critical Thinking: Dealing with Fake News

There are probably as many different suggestions for how to handle the rise of fake news as there are authors on the subject. Critics and scholars alike have called for regulation of social media outlets, development of better algorithms for detecting fake news, and even refusal to use social media sites at all. Reporters and news outlets have been urged to maintain traditional standards for professional journalism so that it is easier for readers to distinguish between fake and legitimate news and so we still have reliable sources of information. Unfortunately, none of us can make any of those things happen. What we do control, however, is our own level of media literacy and our own practices when it comes to reading and sharing news stories online. While it is very important to focus on the institutional and cultural aspects of fake news, and while we should expect the press and our own government to help deal with the problem, it is also true that we as media consumers have a special obligation to deal with fake news. Why? "While news is constructed by journalists, it seems that fake news is co-constructed by the audience, for its fakeness depends a lot on whether the audience perceives the fake as real. Without this complete process of deception, fake news remains a work of fiction. It is when audiences mistake it as real news that fake news is able to play with journalism's legitimacy."[56] As one critic succinctly put it, "fake news exists because as a society we have failed to teach our citizens data and information literacy."[57] Remember that one of the reasons fake news works is that we tend to think we're immune to it, so we don't follow basic advice to help protect ourselves. If we as consumers can learn to see the falseness in fake news, then we can go a long way toward ending the practice—or at least robbing it of much of its power. This entire course is designed to improve media literacy, but there are five distinct steps we can all take to help us resist fake news.

Read Everything

When we encounter articles on social media, we too often pass them on to our friends after reading only their headlines. This is a mistake for several reasons. First, headlines are rarely written by the authors of articles. They are written by editors and sometimes even by the people doing the layout of the web site or newspaper. So when you read a headline you're almost certainly not reading the author's carefully considered summary of their article. While the editors of some newspapers have specific policies intended to help ensure accuracy and consistency in headline writing, others are motivated by different considerations. And that brings us to the second reason not to trust headlines: in these days of a constant online war for attention by various information sources, there is a strong incentive for news sources—even legitimate ones—to write headlines in the most attention-grabbing manner possible. It is very common for headlines to be phrased with a more urgent or provocative tone than the actual articles they reference, and editors have unfortunately learned from the effectiveness of **clickbait**—online content whose only purpose is to drive consumers to click on links that take them to mediocre or uninteresting pages accompanied by extensive advertising. How many times have you seen a link promising that "you won't believe what happens next!" or "this will shock you," only to find that the content is very easy to believe and that you are not shocked at all. Your reaction to the ultimate content isn't the point. The click-bait authors have done their job the moment that you click on their link. They drive up their advertising numbers by drawing hopeful consumers to

disappointing content surrounded by ads. News organizations struggling for views sometimes turn to these sorts of tactics, and as we have already seen, research demonstrates that more provocative-seeming content is much more likely to get shared and liked. Fortunately, it is very easy to solve this problem. All you have to do is read the entire news article before you share it. If you think something is important enough to share with your friends and family (and the rest of the world), then you ought to take the time to actually read it before you pass it on. This isn't just a casual piece of advice, either. When you take the time to read content before you post it, you fundamentally change the nature of what you're doing. Sharing content without examining it make you an unthinking part of the flow of information on the Internet, just another tool by which news organizations and fakers spread their information far and wide. When you take the time to read (and do the next four steps I'm about to describe), you become an editor yourself—a trusted source of information who helps the rest of world determine what content is helpful and what isn't.

Beware

Many guides on how to evaluate information on the Internet and identify fake news give you advice like "determine if something is accurate." But very few of them discuss how, exactly, we are supposed to know what to investigate and what to assume is true. After all, it's not practical to go out and research the truthfulness of every single article you see. Isn't there an easy way to tell if something is suspicious and worth your time to check out? Yes there is. There are a few easy questions to ask about any information you encounter that will help you determine if it's more likely to be fake news. Of course, you should also go through the steps of checking anything you're going to share, but these questions give you warning indicators to be more careful in your research.

IS THIS CONTENT SOMETHING YOU REALLY HOPE WILL BE TRUE?

One way fake news appeals to us is by playing to our biases and predispositions. Have you always suspected that a particular celebrity or politician is a terrible person? Fake news authors take advantage of biases against famous people by producing content that seems to verify your worst suspicions about them. Do you have strong political beliefs? Fake news plays to your hopes for your own party's success and your opponents' failure. The more a particular article seems to be everything you've hoped for, the more suspicious you should be about it.

IS THIS CONTENT SOMETHING YOU REALLY FEAR WILL BE TRUE?

Similarly, fake news creators play off our fears. If an article is everything you feared would come to pass, be particularly suspicious of it. This is true not just of fears we have based on politics, but any kind of fear. There is a strain of fake news, for example, that periodically shows up in the form of stories that a beloved celebrity has died. While those sorts of stories aren't dangerous to our political system, they are deeply manipulative and can cause problems in the lives of celebrities and others. There are also fear-based fake news stories that have more troubling consequences. It is well documented, for example, that fake news creators have generated stories about nonexistent crimes by immigrants in order to worsen social conflicts in the United State and to motivate potential voters who dislike immigration. If a news article reports something you'd always feared might happen, look into it more closely.

IS THIS CONTENT SHOCKING OR SURPRISING?

This one is tricky. Because fake news plays to our biases, it's easy for us to look at something that others might find shocking and decide that it's just the plain truth. If you dislike someone famous, for example, it's easy not to feel surprised at an article documenting truly shocking behavior on their part. Still, it's a good practice to react to any article that seems truly surprising or at odds with what has been going on in the news. Admittedly, this can be very difficult in a world where technology entrepreneur and billionaire Elon Musk suddenly decides to release a rap song about a dead gorilla (no really),[58] but we can do our best.

IS THIS CONTENT ACCOMPANIED BY VERIFIABLE EVIDENCE?



▲ *insta_photos/Shutterstock*

One of the most reliable characteristics of legitimate news is that it provides supporting details for its claims in the form of attributed quotes, references to authoritative sources, and other kinds of evidence we as consumers can go check to ensure the accuracy of what is being reported. This is not to say that journalists who make use of anonymous sources are necessarily engaging in fake news. Although anonymous sourcing has always been the subject of a certain amount of controversy, there are entirely legitimate reasons why someone with accurate information might not want to go on the record. The point is that real reporting generally explains its sourcing and also provides other information we can check out ourselves. The vaguer an article is and the less clear evidence it provides, the more likely it is to be fake news.

DOES IT CONTAIN THE AUTHOR'S OPINION WHEN IT SHOULD ONLY BE NEWS?

Reliable news organizations go to great lengths to distinguish news from opinion. Research indicates that fake news is generally very good at imitating the format of real news, and that it mimics newsworthiness factors like timeliness, negativity, and prominence. However, fake news articles depart from established journalistic norms of objectivity by including personal opinions of the authors themselves in situations where it isn't appropriate.[59] So while it's normal for news stories to report the

opinions of the people being interviewed for a story, if the author is also adding their opinion to a story that isn't labeled as opinion, it's more likely to be fake news.

Verify

Perhaps the easiest quick way to determine if a given article is fake news is to see if the same material is being reported by a diversity of other news organizations. The key word here is "diversity." That doesn't just mean that a story is being repeated many times, it means that different kinds of organizations from multiple perspectives that serve different audiences are reporting the same basic information in different ways. Be suspicious of a story that is only being published by politically partisan web sites—and I'm not talking about The New York Times or CNN, nor am I even talking about openly partisan major news organizations like Fox News and MSNBC. If a story is only being published on glorified political blogs and "news" organizations with names like AngryPatriotsForBigfoot. com, then the story in question is more likely to be fake news. Similarly, if you see an article being repeated in its entirety—word for word—in multiple places, it is much more likely that you're looking at fake news. Finally, while it is sometimes true that only one news organization is reporting a story because their reporters were the first to uncover it, you should also be more suspicious of articles whose claims can only be found in one place. On the other hand, if a story is being reported using different words by multiple major news organizations, wire services, partisan press outlets, and other news sources, then it is much less likely to be fake news.

Check, Check, Check

Just as the Internet makes it easier for fake news to spread quickly, it also gives us unprecedented resources for checking the veracity of information we encounter online. While the truth can often be difficult to determine, especially when it comes to politically controversial issues, there are several ways you can check suspicious articles to reduce the chances that you are spreading fake news.

CHECK THE DATE

This should really fall under the category of reading the whole article, but one of the most common mistakes media consumers make when reading a posted article is failing to look at its original publication date. While it's not technically fake news, it's misleading when someone posts a news article from years ago in the context of a discussion of current events.

CHECK THE FACTS

We are fortunate that a number of relatively reliable organizations have been formed with the goal of checking the truth of various news stories and popular beliefs. There is a large assortment of fact checkers, including Snopes, Politifact, **FactCheck.org**, and many others. These sites are helpful but not infallible. Tandoc notes that there is a "lack of consistency and coherence among different fact-checking sites," which may lead to public confusion about the truth.[60] Perhaps the biggest problem is that different sites rarely check the same facts in the same way. However, multiple fact-checking sites will almost always cover the same general issue. As consumers, it is to our benefit to view these sites as resources and not ultimate arbiters of truth. What is useful about them is that they organize information about a subject for us in a way that is usually easy to understand. If you're concerned that something might be fake news, read what multiple fact checking sites have to say about it, and you'll be a lot better informed.

CHECK THE SOURCE

Serious fake news creators often use the same Internet sites to broadcast their stories. A number of different organizations maintain lists of known fake news sites. Since these lists are constantly changing and being updated, it's best for you to find your own recent list and make use of it. In a pinch, Wikipedia's list isn't bad at all. Not all fake news sites are listed by even the best watchdog groups, however, so it's important to be vigilant. It's useful to start paying attention to the web site addresses of articles. Watch out for the suffix ".co" at the end of suspicious articles. Fake news creators often use sites that sound exactly like mainstream news organizations except for ".co" at the end. That suffix is actually the Internet country code for the nation of Colombia, though I've seen fake news creators claim that it stands for "company." It does not. Because it looks so much like ".com," however, it's easy for a fake news company to create a site like "abcnews.com. co," and if we're not paying attention then we can easily mistake it for the real news organization. If you're not sure whether a story originated with a legitimate news source, go to the main site for the real organization and search for the article's title. If you don't find it, your article might be fake news. If none of that works and you are still concerned, do a search for the article's author. That will often tell you how legitimate they are and can help shed some light on the likelihood that you're reading something made up.

Ask Yourself a Question

When you are considering sharing an article online, there is one question you should ask yourself that most people rarely consider—one question that can help us all avoid becoming disseminators of fake news. The question is this: *do I really need to share this, and if so, why*? Fake news creators take advantage of many different psychological dynamics in order to spread their lies, but maybe the most basic is ego. We all want to be seen as cool, as knowledgeable, as sources of the latest and most interesting information. We want our friends and family to like and share our posts. For some people, those desires make sharing articles on social media very attractive. After all, it takes very little effort to re-post something you've encountered online, and—especially if the article in question seems unique or provocative— the potential for positive reaction by our social network seems strong. There is, however, a downside most of us don't consider: the possibility that we will end up looking gullible to our friends if we post fake news. Most of us have at least one person in our extended online social network who seems to share way too much questionable information. That person often seems annoying and perhaps a little foolish, since they apparently can't distinguish reality from fantasy. We should be at least as strongly motivated *not* to seem gullible and annoying as we are to seem cool and informed. One way to achieve both of those goals is to exercise some reasonable discretion before sharing information online that might turn out to be misleading or entirely fictional. And perhaps the best strategy for minimizing the likelihood of sharing fake news is simply not to share very many things in the first place—to share only those things we are willing to spend a few minutes investigating.

What to Study

KEY WORDS

The Great Moon Hoax

Fake news

Misinformation

Disinformation

Clickbait

IMPORTANT PEOPLE

Ramesses II

Octavian

Mark Antony

Regina Rini

QUESTIONS YOU SHOULD BE ABLE TO ANSWER

- How old is the practice we now refer to as fake news? Has it been a common practice historically?
- What six different things do people mean when they use the phrase “fake news?”
- What is common across the many academic definitions of fake news? What definition are we using, and what four elements does it include? What things are included in and excluded from the category of “fake news” based on this definition?
- Is it always clear whether something is fake news? Why or why not? What does it mean to say that fake news should be seen as a continuum, and why is that true?
- What three events most prominently contributed to the growth of our concern about fake news? How did each event contribute to creating a new era of fake news? Did fake news change the outcome of the 2016 U.S. presidential election?
- What do we know about where fake news comes from?
- What do we know about how fake news spreads? What factors make it more likely that an individual will choose to help spread fake news? What factors are at work in the link between political conservatism and fake news?
- How likely are we to believe fake news, and what factors influence that? What does the third-person effect have to do with the belief in (and spread of) fake news?

- What are the three primary dangers of fake news, and what do we know about each one? What does fake news have to do with the functioning of government?
- What five steps can we as individuals take to identify and avoid spreading fake news? Why is each one of these steps important? What five questions can help you determine if something is likely to be fake news? What three things should you check about something you're considering sharing on the Internet? What final question should you ask yourself before posting something online?

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Introduction to Chapter 15

About This Chapter

The upcoming chapter is doing some important and very difficult work, although as you read it you might not realize everything the author is trying to juggle. Any kind of academic theory is hard to write about, let alone a large group of different theories that are all operating within the same overall area of research. The thing you should remember as you read this chapter, more than anything else, is that theories are our human attempt to understand the vast complexities of the world. We tend to think of a theory as something that is either proven, disproven, or still waiting for more evidence, and for some kinds of scientific exploration perhaps that's true. However, you are currently reading a book about mass media, which is an entirely human creation. That means mass media theories are working on understanding our own activities and responses, and people are not known for their consistency or their rationality. As a result, it's best to think of these theories as complimentary rather than competing. Even theories that have been thoroughly discredited by subsequent research can help us understand mass media better by shedding light on some particular concept or problem. Likewise, theories that have gained a great deal of popularity are not always reliable foundations for new research. Part of the problem is that describing theories tends to make them sound more "proven" than they really are. The key in mass communications research is to understand the ideas behind the theories and then see how they play out in more specific research areas.

And that is ultimately the reason this chapter exists, and it is also the reason it comes at this point in the book. The previous chapters have already presented a number of issues and questions that relate to media effects, but we are about to venture out into three areas of mass media controversy that directly relate to some of the most important potential questions of media effects. To understand the nuances of the research you're going to learn about in future chapters, it's important to start with a basic understanding of how we think mass communication might work and how it might be impacting us. And as students of communication, it's helpful to understand how scholars in this field do their work. Those are the purposes of this chapter.

WHAT TO FOCUS ON

Focus on the material in this introduction. As you read the upcoming chapter, pay attention to the history of the different theories, and especially what caused researchers to shift from one theory to the next. Other than that, unlike previous chapters, there are not specific parts of this one that require more or less of your attention. Focus on the parts of the chapter where more of the key words and important people are described, and make sure you know the answers to the questions at the end of this introduction.

Introductory Information About Theories and Effects of Mass Communication

Rhetorical Criticism

One major source of mass media theory and research not mentioned in the upcoming chapter is rhetorical criticism. Rhetorical criticism straddles the "cultural theory" and "meaning-making perspective" traditions you'll be reading about in this chapter. It focuses on the study of **rhetoric**—the persuasive aspect of communication—an area of human activity that has been discussed, analyzed, and theorized for well over 2,000 years. Modern **rhetorical criticism** was defined by communication scholars Roderick Hart and Suzanne Daughton as "the business of identifying the complications of rhetoric and then unpacking or explaining them in a comprehensive and effective manner."[1] While critical cultural theory asks questions about how culture interacts with people through mass media, rhetorical criticism asks how communication works—especially how communication functions to persuade audiences both large and small. Rhetorical critics tend to analyze messages, whether in the form of literal linguistic texts like books, movies, and songs, or in the form of more subtle acts of communication like architecture, fashion, and even cuisine. Rhetorical criticism includes the study of **argumentation** (how arguments work and how they get made), which has been applied to every mass medium imaginable. But rhetorical criticism has made much broader contributions to mass media theory, producing insights on everything from political campaign communication to the nature of film genres to the persuasive impact of the Internet. Rhetoricians study television, newspapers, magazines, music, and every other kind of mass communication, always focusing on how persuasion works in different mediums, contexts, and circumstances. If there is one idea from the rhetorical tradition that is the most relevant to this course, however, it is the notion that rhetorical criticism is a tool we all use on a regular basis, and that in order to be critical consumers of media we all need to work on our ability to understand and analyze the messages we receive from various mass media sources. In many ways, rhetorical criticism is one of the most basic tools of media literacy anyone can acquire. It is less a source of grand theory (something described at length in the upcoming chapter) and more a series of specific theories and techniques for teaching us how to understand the mechanisms by which mass media impact us.

Focus on Critical Thinking: How to Read Media Research

One of the most interesting impacts of the Internet in the past 20–30 years is that it has made academic research both more accessible and more relevant to our public conversations. Not only traditional media like newspapers and magazines, but also newer formats like blogs, podcasts, and even random social media posts are more and more likely to reference different kinds of research. At the same time, however, there is more controversy than ever before about which research we use, how we use it, and how people interpret the work of scholars in a variety of academic disciplines.

Chapter 11 outlined a few examples of how research can be misused by bad actors who knowingly misrepresent the conclusions of scientists, but the problem is not limited to disinformation. Because

academic research is increasingly part of the public conversation, it is more important than ever for members of the public to be able to read and evaluate such research.

Media research makes its way into the popular discourse on a regular basis. It is common for us to see controversies about media and violence, the impact of video games, journalistic bias, media and race, media and gender, "screen time," concentration of ownership, and many other media-related subjects. As critical media consumers, it's important to be able to evaluate this discourse for yourself. If the Internet has taught us nothing else, it has taught us that we can't always trust information on the Internet. Here are some general tips for how to read media research effectively.

DON'T TRUST HEADLINES

The Internet has made it easier than ever to pass on information about research, but the Internet is also full of lazy people. We tend to rely on headlines to tell us what information is in a news article so that we don't have to go to the trouble of reading it. One 2016 study suggests that 60% of links being shared on Twitter, for example, were never read by the people who shared them.[2] Well, you might say, of course people don't always read the whole article, that's what headlines are for. They're supposed to give us a summary of what's in the article, right? The problem with this belief is that headlines are not usually written by the people who wrote the article, especially in mediums like newspapers and magazines. Writing the headlines is often the job of copy editors, who are charged with overseeing the overall linguistic look of the publication. Editors are all too aware that the public usually only reads the headline of an article, so they are incentivized to write attractive headlines that are likely to lure readers to click on the link to the article– or to share the article with others who might also click on the link. Even the vaunted *New York Times* proudly proclaims that their headline writers are encouraged to use "vivid wording" and "internal tension," which is "when two elements of the headline are at odds, creating a mystery that can only be solved by reading further."[3] Scientific research is complicated and difficult to summarize, and that challenge is only magnified when publishers have a vested interest in making that research seem more controversial, more exciting, more mysterious, or more conclusive than it really is.

READ THE RESEARCH

If headlines are often misleading, the obvious answer is to read the research yourself. In fact, if you are interested in a media-related subject being discussed in traditional mediums or even in conversations on social media, the single most useful thing you can do is go get the actual research being referenced and read it. This can be harder than it seems. When you see a study mentioned in a social media post (or even a mainstream article), there is rarely a link to the original research. Sometimes a bit of work is required to find the original article. For example, the study cited in the previous paragraph about how many articles shared on Twitter are actually read first took quite of lot of searching to locate in its original form. Popular publications tend to reference other popular publications instead of citing original research, even when their focus is on original research. But persistence is important, as most journalists aren't necessarily trained to read academic research.

But that begs an important question: how *are* you supposed to read academic research? Being fully conversant with any scientific literature can take years of study, but there are a few simple things you can do that will allow you to better understand media research controversies without actually attending graduate school. First, read the **abstract**. Scholars are usually required to write a brief summary of their work that is presented at the beginning of the article. That summary is supposed to help other scholars

determine if the research being published is relevant to their interests or to their own work. Then read the introduction, which will frame the research for you and help you understand what question the researchers are trying to answer. Finally, read the conclusions. They will be clearly marked, and will tell you what the researchers think they learned from their work. In many scientific articles, reading the abstract, the introduction, and the conclusion will be enough to help you understand the research, and will allow you to skip over the vast majority of the article.

FOCUS ON THE METHODS

Let's say that you really want to understand a particular piece of research better. Maybe you just find the issue fascinating, or maybe the conclusions don't make any sense to you. Perhaps you just want to understand a piece of research well enough to argue with that annoying person on Twitter. In that case, the next part of a scientific study you should focus on is the methods. This section of the research will explain how the scholars did their research. If they are studying something abstract (like "violence" or "bias") how did they define the thing they're studying? How did they study it in a way that made it tangible? If it's an experiment, how did they do the experiment? Who were the subjects? If it was a survey, how many people took the survey? Who were they? You'd be shocked at how often major pieces of research end up studying a relatively small group of people. Are those people representative of a larger population? The authors of a study will tell you whether they think the group they're studying is representative (or not) and why. Scientific methodology can be complicated, but reading the methods section of a piece of research can provide you with important insights into the strengths and the weaknesses of any conclusions the authors have reached.

BE AWARE OF THE LARGER CONVERSATION

Probably the most misunderstood thing about academic research is the larger context of scientific progress. People who aren't familiar with scholarly work tend to assume that if one study produces a conclusion, then that's the end of the story. When they find out that there are multiple studies about a single subject, and that some of those studies directly contradict each other, they get confused. Does this mean that science is useless? No. It means that the world is complicated and that science is hard. Media scholars assume that the things they study are difficult to understand, and they accept that their work is part of a larger conversation about the truth of that world. It takes more than a single study to understand difficult issues like the ones we study in media research, and it is only over time that we can start to understand how media consumption impacts the world. That's why scholars tend to stress the idea of studying an entire scholarly literature, instead of focusing on a single study. Furthermore, there are questions that generate significant controversy even within a given field of study. Scholars can disagree on basic things like how we should define something, how we should study that thing, and how to interpret the results. That's not a sign of scientific dysfunction, but rather a normal part of the process of knowledge generation. And that's why it's important to understand that not all questions can be answered simply. The piece of research being referenced in a newspaper article or a social media post is probably not the first to examine its subject matter, and it definitely won't be the last. If you want to understand what we know about the world of media, it's best to read a lot of different scholarly articles, and to recognize that we're always learning new things about the world of media.

HAVE SYMPATHY FOR RESEARCHERS

As I just said, science is hard. We've been studying certain things about the natural world for hundreds or even thousands of years, and we keep learning new things and being forced to revise our previous

theories. And that's the natural world. Media researchers have a much harder job, in many ways, than scientists who study planets or rocks or plants. The subject of media research keeps changing as new technology is developed and the habits of consumers change. A study about Internet habits from even five years ago is almost completely useless. It's hard to keep up with what the "media" part of "media research" means. Furthermore, media research focuses on the most difficult subject in all of science: human behavior. Humans resist and confound the research being done on them. They lie (both intentionally and unintentionally), they deceive themselves, they forget things, they exaggerate things, and they minimize things. They pay close attention to the attitude of the researchers, and they will try to give them what they think they want. You know, just to be nice. They try to figure out what the point of the research being done on them is, and they will act in ways that confuse the researchers. You know, just to show you how special they are. If ten people do something, they probably have ten different reasons for doing it. Trying to figure out human behavior is a frustrating and incredibly difficult task. So when you're reading media research and you're complaining about how it's being done or what its conclusions are, have a bit of sympathy for the people doing the research. The work they're doing is complex and difficult, and they're doing their best. They never expected to be part of your Reddit war, and it's not their job to provide you with simple answers to difficult questions. It's their job to search for the truth, and unlike most arguments on the Internet, the truth is often multifaceted and nuanced.

What to Study

KEY WORDS

Rhetoric

Rhetorical criticism

Argumentation

Internal tension

Abstract

Administrative research

Critical research

Transmissional perspective

Ritual perspective

Cultivation analysis

Attitude change theory

Mass society theory

Hypodermic needle/magic bullet theory

Limited effects theories

Two-step flow theory

Opinion leaders, opinion followers

Dissonance Theory

Selective exposure/selective attention

Selective retention

Selective perception

Uses and gratifications approach

Agenda setting, Second-order agenda setting

Social cognitive theory

Modeling, imitation, identification

Observational learning

Cultural theories

Critical cultural theory

Mediatization theory

Meaning-making perspective

Symbolic interaction

Product positioning

Social construction of reality theory

IMPORTANT PEOPLE

James W. Carey

Walter Lippman

Paul Lazarsfeld

Joseph Klapper

QUESTIONS YOU SHOULD BE ABLE TO ANSWER

- What primary question does rhetorical criticism ask? What do rhetorical critics study? Why is rhetorical criticism a basic tool of media literacy?
- Roughly what percentage of links shared on Twitter aren't read first? Who writes headlines? What are their incentives in writing those headlines?
- When you're trying to read an academic article quickly, what parts of it should you start by reading? What sorts of questions should you ask when reading the methods section?
- What does it mean to be aware of the larger conversation around academic research? Why is the work of media researchers arguably harder than that of scientists who study the natural world?
- What is the difference between micro-level and macro-level effects in media research?
- What four ideas are important to recognize in order to understand mass communication theory? (p. 321-322)
- What historical factors led to the development of mass society theory?
- What media event spurred research that led to the limited effects theory?
- What are the four identifying characteristics of modern critical cultural theories?
- What are the five assumptions of cultivation analysis?

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Theories and Effects of Mass Communication

15



There's much more than good comedy happening on *Black-ish*. The potential for powerful—and positive—media effects provides a strong argument for increased media literacy.

ABC/Photofest



Ronald Grant Archive/Alamy Stock Photo

CBS Radio/Photofest

Office of War Information Photograph Collection/ Library of Congress

Andrey_Popov/Shutterstock

Ernst Haas/Hulton Archive/Getty Images

Allstar Picture Library/NBC/Alamy Stock Photo

"I KNOW THIS ISN'T LISTED ON THE SYLLABUS.

But let's call it a pop quiz." Your instructor has surprised you.

"Will this count in our final grade?," you ask. You are seared by the professor's stare. "Put everything away except a piece of paper and a pen."

You do as instructed.

"Number your paper from 1 to 5. Items 1 through 3 are true or false. One. Most people are just looking out for themselves. Two. You can't be too careful in dealing with people. Three. Most people would take advantage of you if they got the chance. Now, number four. How much television do you watch each week?"

Not too tough, you think. You can handle this.

“Finally, number 5. Draw the outline of a dime as close to actual size as possible.”

You think you get the point about watching TV and trusting people, but what’s with the dime? What does that have to do with mass communication theory?

In this chapter, we examine mass communication theory (and we explain the significance of the dime and the other questions from the quiz). After we define theory and discuss why it is important, we see how the various theories of mass communication that are prevalent today developed. We then study several of the most influential contemporary theories before we discuss the relationship between media literacy and mass communication theory. These theories and their application form the basis of our understanding of how media and culture affect one another.

The Effects Debate

Whether the issue is online hate groups, media violence, junk food advertising and childhood obesity, or a decline in the quality of political discourse, the topic of the effects of mass communication is—and has always been—hotly debated. Later in this chapter, we will take detailed looks at issues surrounding these effects, such as the media's impact on violence, the use of drugs and alcohol, and stereotyping. But before we can examine specific effects issues, we must understand that fundamental disagreement exists about the presence, strength, and operation of these effects. Many people still hold to the position that media have limited or minimal effects. Here are their arguments, accompanied by often-made counterarguments.

1. *Media content has limited impact on audiences because it's only make-believe; people know it isn't real.* The counterarguments: (a) News is not make-believe (at least it's not supposed to be), and we are supposed to take it seriously. (b) Many film and television dramas (for example, *NCIS* and *Fleabag*) are intentionally produced to seem real to viewers, with documentary-like production techniques such as handheld cameras and uneven lighting. (c) Much contemporary television is expressly *real*—reality shows such as *Below Deck* and *Unsolved Mysteries* and talk shows such as *The Steve Wilkos Show* purport to present real people. (d) Advertising is supposed to tell the truth. (e) Before they develop the intellectual and critical capacity to know what is not real, children confront the world in all its splendor and vulgarity through television, what television effects researchers call the **early window**. To kids, what they see is real. (f) To enjoy what we consume, we engage the **willing suspension of disbelief**; that is, we willingly accept as real what is put before us.
2. *Media content has limited impact on audiences because it is only play or just entertainment.* The counterarguments: (a) News is not play or entertainment (at least it's not supposed to be). (b) Even if media content is only play, play is very important to the way we develop our knowledge of ourselves and our world. When we play organized sports, we learn teamwork, cooperation, the value of hard work, obedience to authority, and respect for the rules. Why should play be any less influential if we do it on the Internet or at the movies?
3. *If media have any effects at all, they are not the media's fault; media simply hold a mirror to society and reflect the status quo, showing us and our world as they already are.* The counterargument: Media hold a very selective mirror. The whole world, in all its vastness and complexity, cannot possibly be represented, so media practitioners must make choices. For example, when was the last time you saw a car explode in an accident or police shoot it out with the bad guys on a city street? The vast majority of police officers will go their entire careers without ever firing their guns on duty and most will make only one felony arrest a year, but our screens are filled with raging gun battles between police and evil-doers and all kinds of criminals routinely thrown into jail (**Kaba, 2020**). At best, media hold a fun-house mirror to society, distorting what they reflect. Some things are overrepresented, others underrepresented, and still others disappear altogether.
4. *If media have any effect at all, it is only to reinforce preexisting values and beliefs. Family, church, school, and other socializing agents have much more influence.* The counterarguments: (a) The traditional socializing agents have lost much of their power to influence in our complicated and fast-paced world. (b) And *whose* values and beliefs are being reinforced? Not all families, religions, and schools share the same beliefs. (c) Moreover, *reinforcement* is not the same as having no effects. If

media can reinforce the good in our culture, media can just as easily reinforce the bad. Is racism eradicated yet? Sexism? Disrespect for others? If our media are doing no more than reinforcing the values and beliefs that already exist, then they are as empty as many critics contend. As former FCC commissioner Nicholas Johnson long argued of television, the real crime is not what the medium is doing *to* us but what it could be doing *for* us, but isn't.

5. *If media have any effects at all, they are only on the unimportant things in our lives, such as fads and fashions.* The counterarguments: (a) Fads and fashions are not unimportant to us. The cars we drive, the clothes we wear, and the way we look help define us; they characterize us to others. In fact, it is media that have helped make fads and fashions central to our self-definition and happiness. Kids don't kill other kids for their $300 basketball shoes because their mothers told them that Air Jordans were cool (**Collier, 2020**). (b) If media influence only the unimportant things in our lives, why are billions of dollars spent on media efforts to vote for particular political candidates or sway opinion about social issues such as universal health care, nuclear power, and climate change (see **Chapter 9**)?

One reason these arguments about media power and effects continue to rage is that people often come to the issues from completely different perspectives. In their most general form, the debates over media influence have been shaped by three closely related dichotomies: micro- versus macro-level effects, administrative versus critical research, and transmissional versus ritual perspective.



The mirror that media hold up to culture is like a fun-house mirror—some things appear bigger than they truly are, some things appear smaller, and some disappear altogether.

Susan Baran

Micro- versus Macro-Level Effects

People are concerned about the effects of media. Does television cause violence? Do beer ads cause increased alcohol consumption? Does pornography cause rape? The difficulty here is with the word *cause.* Although there is much scientific evidence that media cause many behaviors, there is also much evidence that they do not.

As long as we debate the effects of media only on individuals, we risk remaining blind to what many believe is media's more powerful influence (both positive and negative) on the way we live. For

example, when the shootings at the Littleton, Colorado, Columbine High School in 1999 once again brought public debate on the issue of media effects, USA Network copresident Steve Brenner was forced to defend his industry. “Every American has seen hundreds of films, hundreds of news stories, hundreds of depictions, thousands of cartoons,” he said. “Millions don’t go out and shoot people” (as quoted in **Albiniak, 1999**, p. 8).

Who can argue with this? For most people, media have relatively few *direct* effects at the personal or **micro level**. But we live in a culture in which people *have* shot people or are quick to use violence to settle disputes, at least in part because of the cultural messages embedded in our media fare. The less visible, but much more important, impact of media operates at the cultural or **macro level**. Violence on television contributes to the cultural climate in which real-world violence becomes more acceptable. Sure, perhaps none of us have gone out and shot people. But do you have bars on the windows of your home? Are there parts of town where you would rather not walk alone? Do you vote for the “tough on crime” candidate over the “education” candidate?

The micro-level view is that media violence has little impact because although some people may be directly affected, most people are not. The macro-level view is that media violence has a great impact because it influences the cultural climate. Communication researcher Sut **Jhally (2013)**, speaking specifically about violent video games, highlighted the distinction. Violent games, he said, “don’t create violent people; what they do is glorify a violent culture and shut down our capacity as a society to imagine anything different. They short-circuit our ability to think in more productive ways about the real violence in our lives. That is their real tragedy.”



▸ What are the effects of televised violence? The debate swirls as different people mean different things by “effects.” This scene is from *S.W.A.T.*

Bill Inoshita/CBS/Getty Images

Administrative versus Critical Research

Administrative research asks questions about the immediate, observable influence of mass communication. Does a commercial campaign sell more cereal? Does a heavy dose of celebrity gossip

bring more clicks to an online news site? Did video games inspire the killings of the 20 children and six adults at Sandy Hook Elementary School? For decades the only proof of media effects that science (and therefore the media industries, regulators, and audiences) would accept were those with direct, observable, immediate effects. More than 80 years ago, however, Paul **Lazarsfeld (1941)**, the father of social science research and possibly the most important mass communication researcher of all time, warned of the danger of this narrow view. He believed **critical research**—asking larger questions about what kind of nation we are building, what kind of people we are becoming—would serve our culture better. Writing long before the influence of television and information access through the Internet, he stated:

> Today we live in an environment where skyscrapers shoot up and elevateds [commuter trains] disappear overnight; where news comes like shock every few hours; where continually new news programs keep us from ever finding out details of previous news; and where nature is something we drive past in our cars, perceiving a few quickly changing flashes which turn the majesty of a mountain range into the impression of a motion picture. Might it not be that we do not build up experiences the way it was possible decades ago. . . ? (p. 12)

Administrative research concerns itself with direct causes and effects; critical research looks at larger, possibly more significant cultural questions.

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▲ The transmissional message in this billboard ad is obvious— buy Sea and Ski sun tan lotion. The ritual message communicates many more interesting ideas about the culture.

Ernst Haas/Hulton Archive/Getty Images

Transmissional versus Ritual Perspective

Last is the debate that led Professor James W. Carey to articulate his cultural definition of communication (see **Chapter 1**). The **transmissional perspective** sees media as senders of information for the purpose of control; that is, media either have effects on our behavior or they do not. The **ritual perspective**, **Carey (1975)** wrote, views media not as a means of transmitting "messages in space" but as central to "the maintenance of society in time." Mass communication is "not the act of imparting information but the representation of shared beliefs" (p. 6). In other words, the ritual perspective is necessary to understand the *cultural* importance of mass communication.

Consider an ad for Sea and Ski sun tan lotion. What message is being transmitted? Buy the product, of course. So people either do or do not buy Sea and Ski. The message either controls or does not control people's lotion-buying behavior. That is the transmissional perspective. But what is happening culturally in that ad? What reality about men and women is shared? Can young people really interact without foregrounding sex? Is a woman to be admired only for her looks? What constitutes a good-looking woman? A good-looking man? The ritual perspective illuminates these messages—the culturally important content of the ad.

Defining Mass Communication Theory

Whether you accept the limited effects arguments or their counterarguments, all the positions you just read are based on one or more **mass communication theories**, explanations and predictions of social phenomena that attempt to relate mass communication to various aspects of our personal and cultural lives or social systems. Your responses to the five quiz questions that opened the chapter, for example, can be explained (possibly even predicted) by different mass communication theories.

The first four items are a reflection of **cultivation analysis**—the idea that people's ideas of themselves, their world, and their place in it are shaped and maintained primarily through television. People's responses to the three true or false items can be fairly accurately predicted by the amount of viewing they do (question 4). The more people watch, the more likely they are to respond "true" to these unflattering statements that others are generally selfish, untrustworthy, and out to get you.

The solution to the dime-drawing task is predicted by **attitude change theory**, which explains how people's attitudes are formed, shaped, and changed and how those attitudes influence behavior. Almost everyone draws the dime too small. Because a dime is an inconsequential coin (it won't even buy you a piece of penny candy!), we perceive it as smaller than it really is, and our perceptions guide our behavior. Even though every one of us has held a real-world dime in our hands, our attitudes toward that coin shape our behavior regarding it. Mass communication theorists study media's contribution to the formation of our attitudes on a wide array of issues of far greater importance than the size of a dime.

To understand mass communication theory, you should recognize these important ideas:

1. *There is no one mass communication theory.* There is a theory, for example, that describes something as grand as how we give meaning to cultural symbols and how these symbols influence our behavior (symbolic interaction), and there is a theory that explains something as individual as what a person chooses to do with media (the uses and gratifications approach). Mass communication theorists have produced a number of **middle-range theories** that explain or predict specific, limited aspects of the mass communication process (**Merton, 1967**). You can see an overview of some historically important mass communication theories later on in **Table 15.1**.

▸ **Table 15.1**

Mass Communication Theories

MASS COMMUNICATION THEORY	DESCRIPTION
Mass Society Theory	Idea, propagated by cultural and societal elites, that the media are corrupting influences that undermine the social order; "average" people are defenseless against the influence.

MASS COMMUNICATION THEORY	DESCRIPTION
Limited Effects Theory	Media's influence is limited by people's individual differences, social categories, and personal relationships. These factors "limit" media's influence.
Two-Step Flow Theory	Idea that media's influence on people's behavior is limited by opinion leaders, who consume content, interpret it in light of their own values and beliefs, and pass it on to opinion followers. Therefore the source of effects is interpersonal rather than mass communication.
Attitude Change Theory	Collection of theories explaining how people's attitudes are formed, shaped, and changed through communication and how those attitudes influence behavior.
Dissonance Theory	Argument that people, when confronted by new information, experience mental discomfort (dissonance), so they consciously and subconsciously work to limit or reduce that discomfort through the selective processes.
Reinforcement Theory	Joseph Klapper's idea that if media have any impact at all, it is in the direction of reinforcement, especially as important social factors—school, parents, religion—also reinforce cultural norms.
Uses and Gratifications Approach	Idea that media don't do things to people; people do things *with* media. Audience members are powerful agents in either limiting or allowing effects.
Agenda Setting	Theory that media may not tell us what to think, but do tell us what to think about, meaning media can have important effects for individuals and society.
Social Cognitive Theory	Idea that people learn through observation, either as imitation or identification; actual exhibition of these behaviors is dependent on the reinforcement we associate with them.
Cultural Theory	Idea that meaning and effects are negotiated by media and audiences as they interact in the culture; debate exists over who has the upper hand.

MASS COMMUNICATION THEORY	DESCRIPTION
Critical Cultural Theory	Idea that media operate primarily to justify and support the status quo at the expense of ordinary people. Media and other elites have the upper hand in the negotiation of meaning.
The Frankfurt School	Theory that values serious art, viewing its consumption as a means to elevate people toward a better life; but common media content pacifies and represses ordinary people.
British Cultural Theory	Theory of elites' domination over the larger culture, primarily through mass communication, and its influence on bounded cultures, limiting the expression of their values.
News Production Research	Study of how economic and other influences on the way news is produced distort and bias news coverage toward those in power, especially through news practices such as personalized, dramatized, fragmented, and normalized news.
Mediatization Theory	Argues that media have become so central and essential for modern social orders that those social orders are continually changing in important ways to accommodate the ever-changing media; modern societies are locked into a process of constant change centered around media.
The Meaning-Making Perspective	Idea that active audience members use media content to create meaning and meaningful experiences for themselves. Media-literate consumers can have greater control over the meanings that are made.
Symbolic Interaction	Idea that people give meaning to symbols, which then control people's behavior in their presence.
Social Construction of Reality	Theory that cultures construct and maintain realities by using signs and symbols; people learn to behave in their social world through interaction with them, as those mutually negotiated meanings allow members of a culture to better know one another and predict interactions and behaviors.

MASS COMMUNICATION THEORY	DESCRIPTION
Cultivation Analysis	Idea that television "cultivates" or constructs a reality of the world that, although possibly inaccurate, becomes the accepted reality simply because we as a culture believe it to be; we then base our judgments about and our actions in the world on this cultivated reality.

2. *Mass communication theories are often borrowed from other fields of social science.* Attitude change theory (the dime question), for example, comes from psychology. Mass communication theorists adapt these borrowed theories to questions and issues in communication. People's behavior with regard to issues more important than the size of a dime—democracy, ethnicity, government, and gender roles, for example—is influenced by the attitudes and perceptions presented by our mass media.

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3. *Mass communication theories are human constructions.* People create them, and therefore their creation is influenced by human biases—the times in which we live, the position we occupy in the mass communication process, and a host of other factors. Broadcast industry researchers, for example, have developed somewhat different theories to explain how violence is learned from television than have university researchers.
4. *Mass communication theories are dynamic* because theories are human constructions and the environments in which they are created constantly change; they undergo frequent recasting, acceptance, and rejection. For example, theories that were developed before television and social networking sites became commonplace have to be reexamined and sometimes discarded in the face of these new technologies.

A Short History of Mass Communication Theory

The dynamic nature of mass communication theory can be seen in its history. All disciplines' bodies of knowledge pass through various stages of development. Hypotheses are put forth, tested, and supported or rejected. Eventually a consensus develops that shapes a discipline's central ideas and, as such, the kinds of questions it asks and the answers it seeks—and expects. However, over time some answers come to challenge those expectations. So new questions have to be asked, new answers are produced, and, eventually, a new consensus emerges. Mass communication theory is particularly open to evolving ideas for three reasons:

- *Advances in technology or the introduction of new media* fundamentally alter the nature of mass communication. The coming of radio and movies, for example, forced rethinking of theories based on a print-oriented mass communication system.
- *Calls for control or regulation* of these new technologies require, especially in a democracy such as ours, an objective, science-based justification.
- As a country committed to protecting *democracy and cultural pluralism*, we ask how each new technology or medium can foster our pursuit of that goal.

The evolution in thinking that resulted from these factors has produced four major eras of mass communication theory: the era of mass society theory, the era of the limited effects perspective, the cultural theory era, and the era of the meaning-making perspective. The first two may be considered early eras; the latter two best represent contemporary thinking.

The Era of Mass Society Theory

As we've seen throughout this text, several important mass media appeared or flourished during the second half of the 19th century and the first decades of the 20th century. Mass circulation newspapers and magazines, movies, talkies, and radio all came to prominence at this time. This was also a time of profound change in the nature of US society. Industrialization and urbanization spread, African Americans and poor southern whites streamed northward, and immigrants landed on both coasts in search of opportunity and dignity. People in traditional seats of power—the clergy, politicians, and educators—feared a disruption in the status quo. The country's peaceful rural nature was beginning to slip further into history.

In its place was a cauldron of new and different people with new and different habits, all crammed into rapidly expanding cities. Crime grew, as did social and political unrest. Many cultural, political, educational, and religious leaders thought the United States was becoming too pluralistic. They charged that the mass media catered to the low tastes and limited reading and language abilities of these newcomers by featuring simple and sensation-alistic content. Media, they proclaimed, needed to be controlled to protect traditional values.

The successful use of propaganda by totalitarian governments in Europe, especially Germany's National Socialist Party (the Nazis), provided further evidence of the overwhelming power of media. Social and cultural elites therefore called for greater control of the media to prevent similar abuses at home.

The resulting theory was **mass society theory**—the idea that the media are corrupting influences that undermine the social order and that "average" people are defenseless against their influence. To mass society theorists, "average" people were all those who did not hold their (the theorists') superior tastes and values.

Walter Lippmann, a nationally syndicated columnist for *The New York Times* and one of the country's most important social commentators, was indicatively skeptical of average people's ability to make sense of the confusing world around them. Political essayist Eric Alterman explained and summarized Lippmann's thinking as expressed in the legendary social critic's influential 1922 book *Public Opinion.* He said that Lippman saw the average American as akin to a spectator at an event, sitting in the back row: "He lives in a world he cannot see, does not understand and is unable to direct." American journalism, with its devotion to profit and sensationalism, only compounded the problem; therefore, politics and governing were best left to a "specialized class of men," those sitting closer to the action. **Alterman (2008)** summarized Lippmann's argument: "No one expects a steel-worker to understand physics, so why should he be expected to understand politics?" (p. 10).

The fundamental assumption of this thinking is sometimes expressed in the **hypodermic needle theory** or the **magic bullet theory**. The symbolism of both is apparent—media are a dangerous drug or a killing force against which "average" people are defenseless.



Agnes Ayers recoils in Rudolph Valentino's arms in the 1921 movie *The Sheik.* Mass society theorists saw such common entertainment fare as debasing the culture through its direct and negative effects on helpless audience members.

Ronald Grant Archive/Alamy Stock Photo

Mass society theory is an example of a **grand theory**, one designed to describe and explain all aspects of a given phenomenon. But clearly not all average people were mindlessly influenced by the evil mass media. People made consumption choices. They interpreted media content, often in personally

important ways. Media did have effects, often good ones. No single theory could encompass the wide variety of media effects claimed by mass society theorists, and the theory eventually collapsed under its own weight.

The Emergence of the Limited Effects Perspective

Shifts in a discipline's dominant thinking usually happen over a period of time, and this is true of the move away from mass society theory. However, media researchers often mark the emergence of the limited effects perspective on mass communication as occurring on the eve of Halloween 1938. On that night, actor and director Orson Welles broadcast his dramatized version of the H. G. Wells science fiction classic *The War of the Worlds* on the CBS radio network. Produced in what we would now call docudrama style, the realistic radio play in which Earth came under deadly Martian attack frightened thousands. People fled their homes in panic. Elite media critics argued this was proof of mass society theory, pointing to a radio play with the power to send people into the hills to hide from aliens.

Research by scientists from Princeton University demonstrated that, in fact, 1 million people had been frightened enough by the broadcast to take some action, but the other 5 million people who heard the show had not, mass society theory notwithstanding. More important, however, these scientists determined that different factors led some people to be influenced and others not (**Lowery & DeFleur, 1995**).

The researchers had the benefit of advances in survey research, polling, and other social scientific methods developed and championed by Austrian immigrant Paul Lazarsfeld. They were, in fact, his students and colleagues. **Lazarsfeld (1941)** argued that mere speculation about the impact of media was insufficient to explain the complex interactions that mass communication comprised. Instead, well-designed, sophisticated studies of media and audiences would produce more valuable knowledge.

Using Lazarsfeld's work, researchers identified those individual and social characteristics that led audience members to be influenced (or not) by media. What emerged was the view that media influence was limited by *individual differences* (for example, in intelligence and education), *social categories* (such as religious and political affiliation), and *personal relationships* (such as friends and family). The theories that emerged from this era of the first systematic and scientific study of media effects, taken together, are now called the **limited effects theory**.

TWO-STEP FLOW THEORY



Orson Welles directs *War of the Worlds*. The 1938 Halloween eve broadcast of this science fiction classic helped usher in the era of the scientific study of mass communication.

CBS Radio/Photofest

Lazarsfeld's own **two-step flow theory** of mass media and personal influence is a well-known product of this era and an example of a limited effects theory (**Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955**). His research on the 1940 presidential election indicated that media influence on people's voting behavior was limited by **opinion leaders**—people who initially consumed media content on topics of particular interest to them, interpreted it in light of their own values and beliefs, and then passed it on to **opinion followers**, people like them who had less frequent contact with media (**Figure 15.1**).

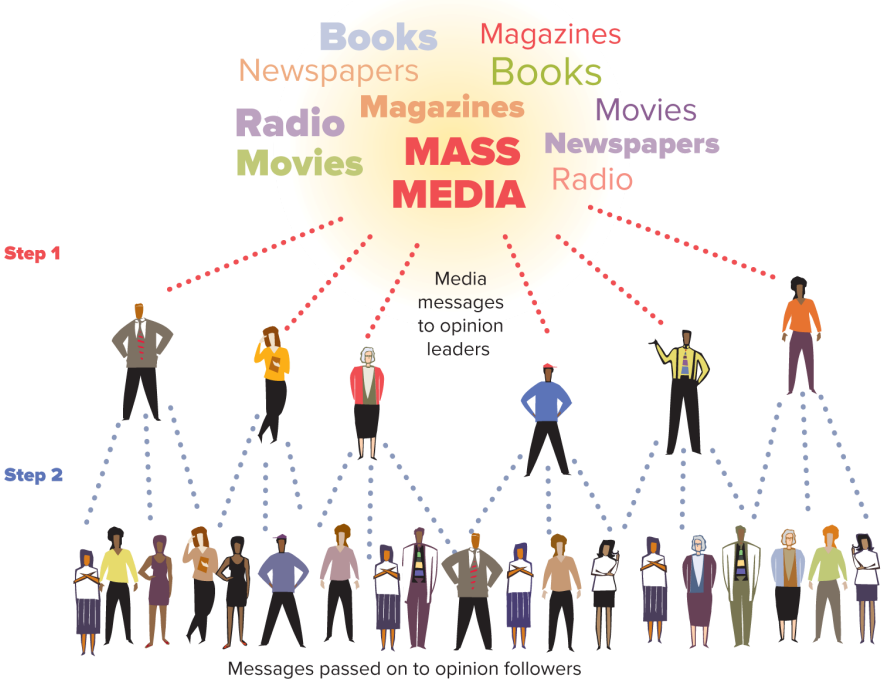


Figure 15.1 Model of Lazarsfeld's Two-Step Flow of Media Influence. Media influence passes from the mass media through opinion leaders to opinion followers. Because leaders and followers share common personal and social characteristics, the potential influence of media is limited by their shared assumptions, beliefs, and attitudes.

Source: Free Press

Two-step flow theory, naturally, has been rethought since Lazarsfeld's time. For example, television and the Internet have given everyone a more or less equal opportunity to consume media content firsthand. There is no doubt that opinion leaders still exist—we often ask friends what they've read or heard about a certain movie, video game, or band for example— but because we now have ubiquitous and universal access to information on our own if we wish, their centrality to the mass communication process has diminished.

ATTITUDE CHANGE THEORY

During and after World War II, the limited effects perspective and several theories it supported became more fully entrenched, controlling research and thinking about media until well into the 1960s. As was the case with virtually all the media and support industries we've studied, the war itself was crucial to the development of mass communication theory during this era.

Memories of World War I were still very much alive, and not all Americans were enthused about entering another seemingly remote world conflict. Those who joined or were drafted into the armed forces apparently knew very little about their comrades-in-arms from different regions of the country and from different backgrounds. German propaganda seemed to prove the view of mass society theorists who claimed that mass media wielded remarkable power. The Office of War Information (OWI), therefore, set out to change public opinion about the wisdom of entering the war, to educate those in the military about their fellow soldiers and sailors, and to counter Nazi propaganda. Speeches and lectures failed. So, too, did informational pamphlets. The OWI then turned to filmmakers such as

Frank Capra and radio personalities such as Kate Smith for their audience appeal and looked to social scientists to measure the effectiveness of these new media campaigns.

The army established the Experimental Section inside its Information and Education Division, staffing it with psychologists who were experts on issues of attitude change. Led by Carl Hovland, these researchers tested the effectiveness of the government's mass communication campaigns. Continuing its work at Yale University after the war, this group produced some of our most influential communication research. Their work led to development of *attitude change theory*, which explains how people's attitudes are formed, shaped, and changed through communication and how those attitudes influence behavior (**Hovland, Lumsdaine, & Sheffield, 1949**).

Among the most important attitude change theories are the related ideas of dissonance and selective processes. **Dissonance theory** argues that when confronted by new or conflicting information, people experience a kind of mental discomfort, a dissonance. As a result, they consciously and subconsciously work to limit or reduce that discomfort through three interrelated **selective processes**. These processes help us "select" what information we consume, remember, and interpret in personally important and idiosyncratic ways:

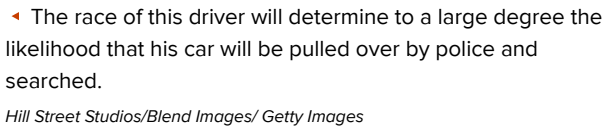
- **Selective exposure** (or **selective attention**) is the process by which people expose themselves to or attend to only those messages consistent with their preexisting attitudes and beliefs. How often do you read the work of an online pundit who occupies a different place on the political spectrum from you? You're more likely to read those pieces that confirm what you already believe. It's quite common for someone who buys a new car, electronic device, or other expensive item to suddenly start to see more of that product's advertising. You've spent a lot of money; that creates dissonance. The ads confirm the wisdom of your decision, reducing dissonance.
- **Selective retention** assumes that people remember best and longest those messages that are consistent with their preexisting attitudes and beliefs. Television viewers, for example, remember much more detail from the convention broadcasts of the political party to which they are philosophically closer than they do the broadcasts of competing parties.
- **Selective perception** predicts that people will interpret messages in a manner consistent with their preexisting attitudes and beliefs. When your favorite politicians change positions on an issue, they're evolving and heeding the public's will. When those you don't like do so, they're flip-flopping and have no convictions. Selective perception explains why, even though they view the same Fox News, 77% of American liberals *distrust* that cable channel and 65% of the country's conservatives *trust* that very same outlet (**Jurkowitz, Mitchell, Shearer, & Walker, 2020**).

The dominant thinking at the time of the development of dissonance theory was limited effects theory; thus, the selective processes were seen as limiting media impact because content is selectively filtered to produce as little attitude change as possible. Contemporary mass communication theorists accept the power of the selective processes to limit the influence of media content when it is primarily informational. However, because so much content is symbolic rather than informational, other theorists see the selective processes as relatively unimportant when it comes to explaining media's contribution to some important cultural effects. You will recognize these differing perspectives on media's power in the distinction made earlier in this chapter between the transmissional and ritual views of mass communication.

Here is an example of the distinction between informational and symbolic content and the way they relate to the selective processes. Few television stations would broadcast lecture programs by people who openly espouse the racist opinion that people of color are genetically more prone to commit crime. If we were to see such a show, however, the selective processes would likely kick in. We would change to another channel (selective exposure). If we did watch, we would interpret the ideas as racist or sick (selective perception); later we would quickly forget the speaker's arguments (selective retention).

Fortunately, the media rarely offer such overtly racist messages. Unfortunately, the more likely situation in contemporary television is that the production conventions and economic and time demands of television news production lead to the common portrayal of certain people as more likely to be involved in violence and crime. It is easier and cheaper, for example, for stations to cover downtown violent crime—it's handy, it's visual, and it needs no significant research or writing—than to cover nonviolent crime, even though the vast majority of all felonies in the United States are nonviolent. As a result of these largely symbolic portrayals of crime, our selective processes do not have an opportunity to reshape the "information" in these news reports. There is little information, only a variety of interesting images, which themselves interfere with the intake of any factual information that may have been included in the report (**Lull & Bushman, 2015**).





The race of this driver will determine to a large degree the likelihood that his car will be pulled over by police and searched.

Hill Street Studios/Blend Images/ Getty Images

Cultural theorists (we'll meet them later in this chapter) point to official government statistics as proof of the power of the media to shape attitudes toward race. Crime in the United States is committed by all races in near proportion to their presence in the population, yet young African Americans are incarcerated at more than four times the rate of young white people, and African Americans overall are imprisoned at more than five times that rate (**Owens, 2020**). African American drivers are 20% more likely to be pulled over by police than are white drivers, and once stopped, they are nearly twice as likely to have their cars searched (**McHarris, 2020**).

An example of this bias in the perception of criminals can be found in a 1947 study on rumor that demonstrated the operation of the selective processes. In this famous experiment, psychologists Gordon Allport and John Postman asked people to whisper from one to another the subject of a drawing in which an African American man is clearly being menaced by a razor-wielding white man. Only the first participant saw the image; more often than not, as the story was passed from person to person, the razor shifted from the left hand of the white aggressor to that of the African American. If our criminal laws and our justice system are supposed to be racially neutral, cultural theorists ask, why do these disparities continue to exist? Why does the razor still change hands? Why are unarmed young Black men13 times more likely to be shot by police than are their white peers (**Schimmack & Carlsson, 2020**)?

REINFORCEMENT THEORY

The selective processes formed the core of what is arguably the most influential book ever published on the impact of mass communication. In *The Effects of Mass Communication*, written in 1960 by the eminent scientist and eventual head of social research for CBS Broadcasting Joseph Klapper, the core of the limited effects perspective is articulated firmly and clearly. Klapper's theory is based on social science evidence developed prior to 1960 and is often called **reinforcement theory**. It was very persuasive at a time when the nation's social fabric had yet to feel the full impact of the cultural change brought about by the war in Vietnam. In addition, flush with enthusiasm and optimism for the technology and science that had helped the United States defeat the Axis powers, the public could see little but good coming from the media technologies, and they trusted the work of Klapper and other scientists.

In retrospect, the value of reinforcement theory may have passed with the book's 1960 publication date. With rapid postwar urbanization, industrialization, and the increase of women in the workplace, Klapper's "nexus of mediating factors and influences" (church, family, and school) began to lose its traditional socializing role for many people. During the 1960s, a decade both revered and reviled for the social and cultural changes it fostered, it became increasingly difficult to ignore the impact of media. Most important, however, is that all the research Klapper had studied in preparation for his book was conducted before 1960, the year in which it is generally accepted that television became a truly mass medium, present in 90% of American homes. Almost none of the science he examined in developing his reinforcement theory considered television.

THE USES AND GRATIFICATIONS APPROACH

Academic disciplines do not change easily. Limited effects researchers were unable to ignore obvious media effects such as the impact of advertising, the media's role in sustaining sentiment against the war in Vietnam and in spreading support for civil rights and the feminist movement, and increases in real-world crime that appeared to parallel increases in televised violence. Therefore, they turned their focus to media consumers to explain how influence is limited. The new body of thought that resulted, called the **uses and gratifications approach**, claimed that media do not do things *to* people; rather, people do things *with* media. In other words, the influence of media is limited to what people allow it to be.

Because the uses and gratifications approach emphasizes *audience members'* motives for making specific consumption choices and the consequences of that intentional media use, it is sometimes seen as being too apologetic for the media industries. In other words, when negative media effects are seen as the product of audience members' media choices and use, the media industries are absolved of responsibility for the content they produce or carry. Media simply give people what they want.

This approach is also criticized because it assumes not only that people know why they make the media content choices they do but also that they can clearly articulate those reasons to uses-and-gratifications researchers. A third criticism is that the approach ignores the fact that much media consumption is unintentional—when we go online for election news, we can't help but see ads. When we go to an action movie, we are presented with various representations of gender and ethnicity that have nothing to do with our reasons for choosing that film. A fourth criticism is that the approach ignores media's cultural role in shaping people's media choices and use.

Despite these criticisms, the uses and gratifications approach served an important function in the development of mass communication theory by stressing the reciprocal nature of the mass communication process. That is, scientists began to take seriously the idea that people are important in the process—they choose content, they make meaning, they act on that meaning.

AGENDA SETTING

During the era of limited effects, several important ideas were developed that began to cast some doubt on the assumption that media influence on people and cultures was minimal. These ideas are still respected and examined even today. Among the most influential is **agenda setting**, a theory that argues that media may not tell us what to think, but media certainly tell us what to think *about.* In 1972, based on their study of the media's role in the 1968 presidential election, Maxwell **McCombs and Donald Shaw (1972)** wrote:

> In choosing and displaying news, editors, newsroom staff, and broadcasters play an important part in shaping political reality. Readers learn not only about a given issue, but how much importance to attach to that issue from the amount of information in a news story and its position. . . . The mass media may well determine the important issues—that is, the media may set the "agenda" of the campaign. (p. 176)

The agenda-setting power of the media resides in more than the amount of space or time devoted to a story and its placement in the broadcast or on the page. Also important is the fact that there is great consistency between media sources across all media in the choice and type of coverage they give an issue or event. This consistency and repetition signal to people the importance of the issue or event.

Researchers Shanto **Iyengar and Donald Kinder (1987)** tested the application of agenda-setting theory to the network evening news shows in a series of experiments. Their conclusions supported McCombs and Shaw. "Americans' views of their society and nation," they wrote, "are powerfully shaped by the

stories that appear on the evening news" (p. 112). But Iyengar and Kinder took agenda setting a step or two further. They discovered that the position of a story affected the agenda-setting power of television news. As you might expect, the lead story on the nightly newscast had the greatest agenda-setting effect, in part because first stories tend to have viewers' full attention—they come before interruptions and other distractions can occur. The second reason, said the researchers, is that viewers accept the broadcasters' implicit categorization of the lead story as the most important.

Agenda-setting theory has evolved since its inception to argue that media *do* tell us what to think as they tell us what to think about. Media *frame* or otherwise set the context for our judgments in what McCombs called **second-order agenda setting** (**McCombs & Ghanem, 2001**). Agenda setting actually operates at two levels: the *object level* (how media coverage influences the priority people give to objects—for example, issues, candidates, events, and problems) and the *attribute level* (how media coverage influences what attributes of those objects people consider important). For example, heavy news coverage may lead us to think about immigration (object) as an important issue, but the nature of that coverage may cause us to consider different aspects (attributes) of immigration—jobs, national security, human decency, legal arguments—in making our judgments of that complex issue.

SOCIAL COGNITIVE THEORY

While mass communication researchers were challenging the limited effects perspective with ideas such as agenda setting and dependency theory, psychologists were expanding **social cognitive theory**—the idea that people learn through observation—and applying it to mass media, especially television (**Bandura, 2001**).

Social cognitive theory argues that people model (copy) the behaviors they see and that **modeling** happens in two ways. The first is **imitation**, the direct replication of an observed behavior. For example, after seeing cartoon mouse Jerry hit cartoon cat Tom with a stick, a child might then hit his sister with a stick. The second form of modeling is **identification**, a special form of imitation in which observers do not copy exactly what they have seen but make a more generalized but related response. For example, the child might still be aggressive toward his sister but dump a pail of water on her head rather than hit her with a stick.

The idea of identification was of particular value to mass communication theorists who studied television's impact on behavior. Everyone admits that people can imitate what they see on television. But not all do, and when this imitation does occur in dramatic instances— for example, when a Washington State man strangled his girlfriend and attempted to dissolve her body in a tub of acid as he had seen in an episode of *Breaking Bad* (the police discovered a DVD in his home cued up to that very scene; **Terle, 2016**)—it is so outrageous that it is considered an aberration. Identification, although obviously harder to see and study, is the more likely way that television influences behavior.

Social cognitive theorists demonstrated that imitation and identification are products of three processes:

Observational learning. Observers can acquire (learn) new behaviors simply by seeing those behaviors performed. Many of us who have never fired a handgun could do so because we've seen it done.

Inhibitory effects. Seeing a model, a movie character, for example, punished for a behavior reduces the likelihood that the observer will perform that behavior. In the media we see Good Samaritans

sued for trying to help someone, and it reduces our willingness to help in similar situations. That behavior is inhibited by what we've seen.

Disinhibitory effects. Seeing a model rewarded for prohibited or threatening behavior increases the likelihood that the observer will perform that behavior. This, for example, is the basis for complaints against the glorification of crime and drugs in movies. Behaviors that people might not otherwise make, those that are inhibited, now become more likely to occur. The behaviors are disinhibited.

Cultural Theory—A Return to the Idea of Powerful Effects

The questions asked and the answers produced by the agenda-setting and social cognitive theorists were no surprise to their contemporaries, the cultural theorists. These observers were primarily European social theorists and North American humanities scholars such as Marshall McLuhan and James Carey, both of whom we met earlier in this text.

As America entered the 1960s, no one could remain unaware of the obvious and observable impact television was having on the culture; the increased sophistication of media industries and media consumers; entrenched social problems such as racial strife and gender inequality; the apparent cheapening of the political process; and the emergence of calls for controls on new technologies such as cable, satellite, and computer networks. Mass communication theorists were forced to rethink media's influence. Clearly, the limited effects idea was inadequate to explain the media impact they saw around themselves every day. But just as clearly, mass society theory explained very little.

It's important to remember that prominent theories never totally disappear. Joseph McCarthy's efforts to purge Hollywood of communists in the 1950s, for example, were based on mass society notions of evil media and malleable audiences, as was William Barr's public assertion, while serving as Attorney General in the Trump administration, that "secularists . . . have marshaled all the force of mass communications, popular culture, the entertainment industry, and academia in an unremitting assault on religion and traditional values" (in **Ford, 2020**, p. 32). Mass society theory was also at the heart of one-time White House adviser Sebastian Gorka's insistence that the Teletubbies started "that whole trans thing" (**Langum, 2019**), although some observers felt that soda maker Sprite and its "Pride-Sprite" ad campaign should share the "shame" of "transgender indoctrination"; after all, they warned, "the word 'Sprite' denotes an enchanter, goblin, or demon" (**Lane, 2019**). Social cognitive theory, limited effects, and uses and gratifications are regularly raised in today's debates over the regulation of video games and fast-food advertising aimed at kids (see **Chapters 8**).

However, the theories that have gained the most support among today's media researchers and theorists are those that accept the potential for powerful media effects, a potential that is *either* enhanced or thwarted by audience members' involvement in the mass communication process. Important to this perspective on audience–media interaction are **cultural theories**. Stanley **Baran and Dennis Davis (2021)** wrote that these theories share "an underlying assumption that our experience of reality is an ongoing, social construction in which we have some responsibility, not something that is only sent, delivered, or otherwise transmitted by some authority or elite" (p. 341). This book's focus on media literacy is based in large part on cultural theories, which say that meaning and, therefore, effects are negotiated by media and audiences as they interact in the culture.

CRITICAL CULTURAL THEORY

A major influence on mass communication theory came from European scholarship on media effects. **Critical cultural theory**—the idea that media operate primarily to justify and support the status quo at the expense of ordinary people—is openly political and is rooted in **neo-Marxist theory**. "Old-fashioned" Marxists believed that people were oppressed by those who owned the factories and the land (the means of production). They called the factories and land the *base.* Modern neo-Marxist theorists believe that people are oppressed by those who control the culture, the *superstructure*—religion, politics, art, literature, and of course the mass media.

Modern critical cultural theory encompasses a number of different conceptions of the relationship between media and culture, but all share these identifying characteristics:

- *They tend to be macroscopic in scope.* They examine broad, culturewide media effects.
- *They are openly and avowedly political.* Based on neo-Marxism, their orientation is from the political left.
- *Their goal is at the least to instigate change in government media policies, and at the most to effect wholesale change in media and cultural systems.* Critical cultural theories logically assume that the superstructure, which favors those in power, must be altered.
- *They investigate and explain how elites use media to maintain their positions of privilege and power.* Issues such as media ownership, government–media relations, and corporate media representations of labor and disenfranchised groups are typical topics of study for critical cultural theory because they center on the exercise of power. You can read a critical cultural theory critique of the common charge that the media have a progressive slant in the box titled "Are the News Media Really Liberal?"



▲ Did the Teletubbies start "that whole trans thing"?

MARKA/Alamy Stock Photo

THE FRANKFURT SCHOOL



▲ Former US Attorney General William Barr lamented the "unremitting assault on religion and traditional values" unleashed by "mass communication, popular culture, the entertainment industry, and academia."

Bill Greenblatt/UPI/Alamy Stock Photo

The critical cultural perspective actually came to the United States in the 1930s when two prominent media scholars from the University of Frankfurt escaped Hitler's Germany. Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer were at the heart of what became known as the **Frankfurt School** of media theory (**Arato & Gebhardt, 1978**). Their approach, centered in neo-Marxism, valued serious art (literature, symphonic music, and theater) and saw consumption of art as a means to elevate all people toward a better life. Typical media fare—popular music, slapstick radio and movie comedies, the soft news dominant in newspapers—pacified ordinary people while assisting in their repression.

Adorno and Horkheimer's influence on US media theory was small during their lifetimes. The limited effects perspective was about to blossom, neo-Marxism was not well received, and their ideas sounded a bit too much like mass society theory claims of a corrupting and debasing popular media. More recently, though, the Frankfurt School has been "rediscovered," and its influence can be seen in three final examples of contemporary critical theory, British cultural theory, news production research, and mediatization.

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BRITISH CULTURAL THEORY

There was significant class tension in England after World War II. During the 1950s and 1960s, working-class people who had fought for their country were unwilling to return to England's traditional notions of nobility and privilege. Many saw the British media—with broadcasting dominated by graduates of the best upper-crust schools, and newspapers and magazines owned by the wealthy—as supporting long-standing class distinctions and divisions. This environment of class conflict produced theorists such as Stuart **Hall (1980)**, who first developed the idea of media as a public forum in which various forces fight to shape perceptions of everyday reality (see **Chapter 1**). Hall and others in British cultural studies trusted that the media *could* serve all people. However, because of ownership patterns, the commercial orientation of the media, and sympathetic government policies toward

media, the forum was dominated by the reigning elite. In other words, the loudest voice in the give-and-take of the cultural forum belonged to those already well entrenched in the power structure. **British cultural theory** today provides a home for much feminist research and research on popular culture both in Europe and in the United States.

MEDIATIZATION THEORY

A wide-ranging macro-level perspective, **mediatization theory**, has recently emerged from Europe. It asserts that media have become so central and essential to modern societies that those societies are forced to change in important ways to accommodate them. The institutions that people have come to rely on, for example, politics, religion, business, and education, "have been 'mediatized'—their structures and their routine social practices have been altered and continue to be altered to accommodate media. . .These institutions don't just use media—they are used by media and made to fit within constraints set by media" (**Baran & Davis, 2021**, p. 372). If you are a sports fan, for example, you no doubt have seen how the games you follow have changed—games and seasons are longer and more reliant on spectacle and there are constant rule changes—all to accommodate television.



◂ Normalized news: No media account of a plane crash is complete without assurance that the flight recorder will help officials pinpoint the cause of the crash.

Mehdi Fedouach/AFP/Getty Images

The political system offers another example. Its traditional role is to enlighten voters and engage citizens. But it does not, according to researchers Silvia Knobloch-Westerwick and Axel Westerwick, because it has become mediatized. "Given that politics in a democracy depend on acceptance and voters' support," they wrote, "actors in the political system will frequently act to accommodate media logic" (2020, p. 119). Former President Trump, for example, instructed his White House advisers to "think of every day of his administration as an episode of a reality [TV] show" (**Poniewozik, 2020**, p. A4).

An inevitable result of mediatization, **media logic** means that institutions and the people in them must respond to the demands of the medium in which they wish to express themselves. Andrew Yang, candidate for the 2020 Democratic Presidential nomination, decried media logic from the stage

of one of that contest's debates: "Instead of talking about automation [of the workforce] and our future. . .we're up here with makeup on our faces and our rehearsed attack lines, playing roles in this reality TV show" (in **Nichols, 2019**, p. 3).

According to mediatization theory, even our everyday lives have been mediatized. There was no such thing as a gender-reveal party until social media made knowing the sex of a fetus a "big reveal" on Instagram. And are you really married if your ceremony has no well-choreographed wedding party YouTube dance entrance? Or simply point your smartphone camera at a group of friends and watch their behavior immediately change; their interactions have become mediatized.

The Meaning-Making Perspective

A more micro-level-centered view of media influence, one paralleling cultural theories in its belief in the power of mass communication, is the **meaning-making perspective**, the idea that active audience members use media content to create meaning, and meaningful experiences, for themselves. Naturally, this use can produce important macro-level, or cultural, effects as well. Cultural and meaning-making theories, taken together, make a most powerful case for becoming media literate. They argue that who we are and the world in which we live are in large part of our own making.

SYMBOLIC INTERACTION

Mass communication theorists borrowed **symbolic interaction** from psychology. It is the idea that cultural symbols are learned through interaction and then mediate that interaction. In other words, people give things meaning, and that meaning controls their behavior. The flag is a perfect example. We have decided that an array of red, white, and blue cloth, assembled in a particular way, represents not only our nation but its values and beliefs. The flag has meaning because we have given it meaning, and that meaning now governs certain behavior toward the flag. We know to stand when a color guard carries the flag into a room. Failing to do so is considered a mark of disrespect, an insult. This is symbolic interaction.

Communication scholars Don **Faules and Dennis Alexander (1978)** define communication as "symbolic behavior which results in various degrees of shared meaning and values between participants" (p. 23). In their view, symbolic interaction is an excellent way to explain how mass communication shapes our behaviors. Accepting that these symbolic meanings are negotiated by participants in the culture, mass communication scholars are left with these questions: What do the media contribute to these negotiations, and how powerful are they?

Symbolic interaction theory is frequently used in the study of the influence of advertising because marketers often succeed by encouraging the audience to perceive their products as symbols that have meaning beyond the products' actual function. This is called **product positioning**. For example, what does a Cadillac mean? Success. A Porsche? Virility. General Foods International Coffees? Togetherness and intimacy.

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF REALITY

If we keep in mind James Carey's cultural definition of communication—a symbolic process whereby reality is produced, maintained, repaired, and transformed—we cannot be surprised that mass communication theorists have been drawn to the ideas of sociologists Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann. In their 1966 book, *The Social Construction of Reality*, they don't directly discuss mass

communication, but they offer a compelling theory to explain how cultures use signs and symbols to construct and maintain a uniform reality.

Social construction of reality theory argues that people who share a culture also share "an ongoing correspondence" of meaning. Things generally mean the same to me as they do to you. A stop sign, for example, has just about the same meaning for everyone. Berger and Luckmann call these things that have "objective" meaning **symbols**—we routinely interpret them in the usual way. But there are other things in the environment to which we assign "subjective" meaning. These things they call **signs**. In social construction of reality, then, a car is a symbol of mobility, but a Cadillac or Mercedes-Benz is a sign of wealth or success. In either case, the meaning is negotiated, but for signs, the negotiation is a bit more complex.

Through interaction in and with the culture over time, people bring together what they have learned about these signs and symbols to form **typification schemes**—collections of meanings assigned to some phenomenon or situation. These typification schemes form a natural backdrop for people's interpretation of and behavior in "the major routines of everyday life, not only the typification of others . . . but typifications of all sorts of events and experiences" (**Berger & Luckmann, 1966**, p. 43). When you enter a classroom, you automatically recall the cultural meaning of its various elements: desks in rows, chalkboard or whiteboard, lectern. You recognize this as a classroom and impose your "classroom typification scheme." You know how to behave: address the person standing at the front of the room with courtesy, raise your hand when you have a question, talk to your neighbors in whispers. These "rules of behavior" were not published on the classroom door. You applied them because they were appropriate to the "reality" of the setting in your culture. In other cultures, behaviors in this setting may be quite different.

Social construction of reality is important to researchers who study the effects of advertising for the same reasons that symbolic interaction has proven valuable. But it is also widely applied when looking at how media, especially news, shape our political realities.

Crime offers one example. What do politicians mean when they say they are "tough on crime"? What is their (and your) reality of crime? It is likely that "crime" signifies (is a sign for) gangs, drugs, and violence. However, the statistical (rather than the socially constructed) reality is that there is 10 times more white-collar crime in the United States than there is violent crime. And why, when violent crime is at a 30-year low, do 6 in 10 Americans believe that crime is at an all-time high (**Gramlich, 2020**)? Now think of welfare. What reality is signified? Is it big corporations, failing to pay their fair share of taxes, seeking subsidies and tax breaks from the government? Or is it unwed, unemployed mothers, unwilling to work, looking for a handout? Social construction theorists argue that the "building blocks" for the construction of these "realities" come primarily from the mass media.

CULTIVATION ANALYSIS

Symbolic interaction and social construction of reality provide a strong foundation for *cultivation analysis*, which says that television "cultivates" or constructs a reality of the world that, although possibly inaccurate, becomes meaningful to us simply because we believe it to be true. We then base our judgments about and our actions in the world on this cultivated reality provided by television.

Although cultivation analysis was developed by media researcher George Gerbner and his colleagues out of concern over the effects of television violence, it has been applied to countless other television-

cultivated realities such as beauty, sex roles, religion, the judicial process, and marriage. In all cases the assumptions are the same—television cultivates realities, especially for heavy viewers.

Cultivation analysis is based on five assumptions:

1. *Television is essentially and fundamentally different from other mass media.* Unlike books, newspapers, and magazines, television requires no reading ability. Unlike the movies, television requires no mobility or cash; it is in the home, and it is free. Unlike radio, television combines pictures and sound. It can be consumed from people's very earliest to their last years of life.
2. *Television is the "central cultural arm" of US society.* **Gerbner and his colleagues (1978)** wrote that television, as our culture's primary storyteller, is "the chief creator of synthetic cultural patterns (entertainment and information) for the most heterogeneous mass publics in history, including large groups that have never shared in any common public message systems" (p. 178). The product of this sharing of messages is the **mainstreaming** of reality, moving individual and different people toward a shared, television-created understanding of how things are.

3. *The realities cultivated by television are not necessarily specific attitudes and opinions but rather more basic assumptions about the "facts" of life.* Television does not teach facts and figures; it builds general frames of reference. Return to our earlier discussion of the portrayal of crime on television. Television newscasters never say, "Most crime is violent, most violent crime is committed by people of color, and you should be wary of those people." But by the choices news producers make, television news presents a broad picture of "reality" with little regard for how its "reality" matches that of its audience.
4. *The major cultural function of television is to stabilize social patterns.* That is, the existing power relationships of the culture are reinforced and maintained through the meaning-making television images encourage. **Gerbner and his colleagues (1978)** made this argument:

   > The repetitive pattern of television's mass-produced messages and images forms the mainstream of the common symbolic environment that cultivates the most widely shared conceptions of reality. We live in terms of the stories we tell—stories about what things exist, stories about how things work, and stories about what to do—and television tells them all through news, drama, and advertising to almost everybody most of the time. (p. 178)

   Because the media industries have a stake in the political, social, and economic structures as they exist, their stories rarely challenge the system that has enriched them.
5. *The observable, measurable, independent contributions of television to the culture are relatively small.* This is not a restatement of limited effects theory. Instead, **Gerbner and his colleagues (1980)** explained its meaning with an "ice-age analogy":

   > Just as an average temperature shift of a few degrees can lead to an ice age . . . so too can a relatively small but pervasive influence make a crucial difference. The "size" of an effect is far less critical than the direction of its steady contribution. (p. 14)

   In other words, even though we cannot always see media effects on ourselves and others, they do occur and eventually will change the culture, possibly in profound ways.

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Media & Violence—Chapter 16

About This Chapter

This chapter is the first of three media controversies we will explore in this book. Not coincidentally, all three focus on issues of media effects. This chapter deals with what might be the most popular argument about media in the popular press: the prospect that consuming violent media might cause violent thoughts and even violent actions. This controversy has been going on since the 1950s, and has been pursued by academics, professional organizations, the popular press, political advocacy groups, and politicians. It is often presented as a simple issue of scientific consensus, but in fact it involves a great deal of nuance as well as differences of opinion and fierce disagreements between scholars. This entire chapter is a focus on critical thinking, with the relevant question being, “does consuming violent media make you a more violent person, and why are we so obsessed with that question?”

WHAT TO FOCUS ON

Focus on the entire chapter, especially the key words and questions in the “What to Study” section at the end of the chapter.

Media Violence and Real-World Violence

Violence: A Defining Characteristic of Modern Media

When it comes to modern mass media, one area where academic research and the common-sense experience of most media consumers has converged is on the question of the amount of violence to which we are all exposed. To be blunt, we are exposed to more violence than ever before. This is not to say that every single piece of content on television, in the movies, on the Internet, and everywhere else is necessarily violent. One of the hallmarks of the modern mass media marketplace is that it is possible for consumers to tailor their consumption to their own personal tastes. It is, therefore, possible that a given person might have constructed for themselves a media diet that includes no violence. However, the stark truth of the overall media marketplace is that violence is increasingly common. Studies have found violence in the vast majority of even G-rated films, and at least 60% of prime time television shows contain violence. "It estimated that the typical child will have seen 8000 murders and 100,000 other acts of violence (including rape and assault) before middle school."[1] It's important, however, to understand exactly what's going on with our greater exposure to violence.



▼ JULY 30 2019: Close-up of NECA Ultimate "Friday the 13th" Jason Voorhees figure, custom "Halloween" Michael Myers figure, and NECA Ultimate "Nightmare on Elm Street" Freddy Kruger figure

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It is not necessarily true that violence on television is more frequent than it has been in the past. The most comprehensive research on this question to date studied prime time network television from 1967 through 2015. The authors found that violence did not grow steadily over time—there was already a tremendous amount of violence on television in 1967. There were significant spikes in television

violence in the mid-to-late 1970s, as well as the mid-1980s and again in the late 2000s.[2] However, there were also periodic declines in violence, especially during most of the 1990s and just after 2010. Although various measures of TV violence seem to be going up, some of them are going down, and there is no consistent upward trend in violence over the years in any category.[3] The authors conclude that "Violence has been a staple in network prime-time programming for more than 50 years, despite all the immense technological and institutional changes that have transformed the medium." This means that "On television, violence is never far from the scene and remains difficult for the heavy viewer to avoid."[4] If there has been no dramatic increase, however, why do we say that consumption of violence is on the rise? The answer is that overall *amount* of media we consume is steadily rising. In the U.S., for example, 2–5 year-olds watch an average of 32 hours of television per week, with 6–11 year-olds watching an average of 28.[5] Children and adolescents spend around 7.5 hours a day using various forms of media—and that is part of the key to the rise in overall consumption. "Today's children live in environments where, on average, families own nearly four televisions, nearly three DVD players, one DVR, two CD players, two radios, two video game consoles, and two computers. Television still dominates children's media consumption, but the number of kids watching television are dropping with each age group. At the same time, media consumption through mobile devices and the Internet is increasing in every age group."[6] We are watching more hours of media using more kinds of devices, throughout more of our day than ever. This has led the American Academy of Family Physicians to conclude that "Violence is ubiquitous in mass media in the U.S., whether consumed through television, video games, music, movies, or the Internet."[7]

The Evidence for a Link

All this violence has prompted researchers, politicians, watchdog groups, and regular consumers to ask why, if at all, we should be concerned. The answer that has received far and away the most attention by every one of these groups is the possibility that there is a relationship between consumption of violent media and the incidence of actual, real-world violence. In other words, it's conceivable that consuming violent media might be making us more violent. If you look at the most prominent statements about the academic literature on this subject, there seems to be an overwhelming consensus. The International Society for Research on Aggression appointed a commission to study the state of scientific knowledge about media violence. That commission reported that "Over the past 50 years, a large number of studies conducted around the world have shown that watching violent television, watching violent films, or playing violent video games increases the likelihood for aggressive behavior. This is true across studies using different methods, coming from different countries, and covering different time periods."[8] The commission described the effects discovered by researchers as "remarkably consistent regardless of the type of medium, age, gender, or where the person lives in the world."[9] The American Academy of Family Physicians notes that the academic literature "includes more than 2,000 scientific papers, studies, and reviews demonstrating the various effects that exposure to media violence can have on children and adolescents" and notes that "[s]ome studies found the strength of association" between media and violence "to be nearly as strong as the association between cigarette smoking and lung cancer, and stronger than the well-established associations between calcium intake and bone mass, lead ingestion and IQ, and failure to use condoms and acquisition of HIV."[10]

The American Medical Association, the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Psychiatric Association, and the American Psychological Association have all issued statements concluding that there is overwhelming evidence of a causal link between consuming media violence and aggressive behavior.

That was easy, right? I mean, when the evidence is overwhelming like that, there's just nothing else to say, is there? Thank goodness, too, because the last thing any of us needed was another lengthy, nuanced explanation of complicated research about complex human behavior, am I right? Hello?

Not So Fast, My Friend

You didn't really think it was going to be that easy, did you?

Although you wouldn't necessarily realize this based on the most prominent statements by media violence researchers—especially those most likely to be quoted in the popular press—there has been a significant debate among researchers about the nature of existing knowledge about media violence effects. This debate stretches back decades and involves a range of different concerns. To begin with, there is disagreement about how and whether consuming violent media leads to real-world violence. In 2008, media scholars Savage and Yancey conducted a meta-analysis of studies and concluded that existing research "does not provide support for the supposition that exposure to media violence causes criminally violent behavior. . . . With regard to the developmental question of whether a 'diet of violent TV' causes violent behavior, we must conclude that the evidence is not adequate to claim that exposure to violent TV is a significant source of violence in U.S. society."[11] Many previous and subsequent researchers have also found no relationship between violent media and aggression. But how can this be? How can such a substantial debate exist at the same time that so many prominent researchers and medical and academic organizations are declaring that the matter is settled?

The first part of the explanation has to do with definitions. Brad Bushman and Craig Anderson, two of the most notable scholars on the "media violence causes aggression" side of the debate, have complained that popular representations of their work misunderstand the definition of causality, aggression, and violence.[12] Exploring these words is critical to understand the debate about media violence research. Most people tend to think of causality as a simple issue—X causes Y, like fire causes burns or jumping in a pool causes you to get wet. That is certainly one kind of causality, but it's not the only kind. When social scientists talk about **causality**, they are usually not talking about simple, one-to-one relationships. Instead, they are talking about tendencies and probabilities. Even the research that shows the clearest relationship between consumption of violent media and real-world violence only indicates that consuming media violence makes it more *probable* that someone will commit violence. Furthermore, most researchers characterize media violence as a *risk factor*, not a direct cause. Bushman and Anderson point out that popular press articles and political statements tend to suggest that there can be "one and only one 'cause'" of violence.

> However, violent criminal behavior is almost never the result of a single cause. Human violence is a complex phenomenon that results from a convergence of multiple causal risk factors. Some factors, such as easy access to guns and to the intended targets, enable the violence. Motivating factors involve current and recent situational factors such as perceived provocations. Inherent factors involve personality characteristics of the perpetrator, which themselves are influenced by host of biological (e.g., certain genetic or brain chemistry factors) and life events (e.g., parental abuse, habitual exposure to media violence). Thus, any claim that a single risk factor was "the cause" of a violent episode may make for a good news story, but it is overly simplistic.[13]

To make this whole issue even more complicated, extensive research has demonstrated that different people react differently to violent media in different circumstances. There seems to be a small group of people who are very susceptible to violent imagery and messages, while a much larger group of people are relatively insulated from that influence. So, the bottom line is that even the strongest research can only establish that consuming violent media violence makes it more *probable* (but not certain) that *some* people may react violently over time. The claim that the relationship between media violence and real world violence is analogous to the relationship between cigarettes and cancer, for example, was highly questionable in the first place and has subsequently been disproven.[14]

Perhaps the biggest misunderstanding about media violence research involves the distinction between the words "aggression" and "violence." Unfortunately, people often see these two terms as identical. When social scientists use them in media research, however, they are very different. **Violence** is a narrow term that describes relatively extreme behavior that is intended to cause injury. **Aggression**, on the other hand, is a much broader term that describes a wide range of hostile behaviors. Violence is a kind of aggression, but not all aggression is violent. So, for example, in most media research, we would classify angrily yelling at someone as aggressive, but not violent. One child shoving another is usually aggressive but not necessarily violent. However, punches are both violent and aggressive. This kind of distinction complicates the lives of media researchers in multiple ways. It means they have to make difficult decisions when determining what sort of media representations are violent, and it means they have to make similar decisions when classifying real-world human behaviors. The claim we see in the popular press is that consuming violent media results in real-world violence. Most researchers are pretty uniformly measuring *violence* when it comes to the kinds of media consumption they're studying. But the real-world human behaviors they are linking to that violent media are better described as nonviolent aggression.

This brings us to the second part of the explanation for the confusing nature of the media violence research world. Most people don't understand the **methodologies** social scientists use—the ways scientists translate abstract questions into specific strategies for researching human psychology and behavior. When it comes to media violence, understanding the "how" of research is particularly important. Think about it: how can you tell if consuming violent media makes someone violent? One very popular scientific method is the laboratory experiment. Do you just get a bunch of people together, show them a lot of violent media, and then put them in a room with available weapons and wait to see what happens? No. That kind of research would be unethical, dangerous, and not particularly controlled. This might seem like a silly question, but it's a real challenge for media violence researchers. As a result, "very little research has actually examined severe forms of violent behavior, but instead utilized questionnaire and laboratory-based designs that assess proxy measures of violence."[15]

In other words, instead of trying to prod people into committing physical violence, media researchers either use surveys to gauge the mental state of their subjects or they give people the opportunity to commit nonviolent acts that seem related to or analogous to real violence. Critics have argued that there's a difference between how people fill out surveys and how they act in real life, and that we're not sure how closely related non-violent activities are to actual violence. Researchers have also done large scale studies, where, instead of doing laboratory experiments they examine populations of people and compare different habits and outcomes. This research seeks to isolate the variable of violent media consumption and determine whether it is correlated with violent behavior. In other words, if we examine large populations of people, are the violent ones more likely to consume violent media? The

difficulty is that acts of real violence are relatively rare, so "most research in this area has examined either hostile thoughts or aggressive behaviors, which include both physical and nonphysical acts ranging from insulting to pushing or shoving others."[16]

The theory that consuming violent media results in real world violence confronts a particularly significant challenge if we examine changes in violent crime rates over time. If you look at the violent crime rate in the United States since 1960, there was a steady increase until the early 1990s. But then things changed, and the crime rate since that time has declined rapidly. Criminal justice professor Alan Lizotte sums up this trend by noting that "For 15 to 20 years both the violent and nonviolent crime rates as measured by the FBI's Uniform Crime Report (UCR) have been dropping like a rock. It is now at the level of the early 1950s."[17] There have obviously been periods of concern due to comparatively minor fluctuations in the crime rate. For example, crime rates ticked up slightly during 2015 and 2016, but the downward trend resumed in 2017 and 2018.[18] Then, violent crime rose by 5.6% between 2019 and 2020. Murders increased nearly 30%.[19] Newspaper headlines screamed in panic about this supposedly unprecedented wave of violence, and politicians cast blame in various directions and announced new policies. However, these statistics are misleading. Although any violent crime is awful, especially for those involved, even in 2020 the violent crime rate was less than half what it was in 1991. It's easy for crime rates to rise by a large percentage if they're low in the first place. Furthermore, nonviolent crime declined considerably during that same period.



▼ *ESB Professional/Shutterstock*

This gives rise to a simple question: if violent media consumption is on the rise, why is violence declining? This is particularly mysterious when it comes to trends among young people. As psychology professor Patrick Markey and his team of researchers pointed out, "The overriding question is why the post-1993 era, when violent movies, music, television, video games, and Internet sites proliferated in an unprecedented fashion, did not feature a proliferation of real-world violence by gun-wielding young assailants? Instead, data suggest an unprecedented plunge in violence of all types among young people that far exceeded trends among older ages. Among teenagers, gun homicide mortality rates fell by over 60% and homicide arrest rates fell by 80% from their early 1990s peak through 2012."[20] Furthermore, Markey and his team conducted a thorough examination of the trends in violent movies for over 50 years and compared them to violent crime rates. "Contrary to the notion that trends in violent films are linked to violent behavior, no evidence was found to suggest this medium was a major (or minor) contributing cause of violence in the United States. Annual trends in violent films for the past 52 years were unrelated to violent crime. Annual trends in gun violence in PG-13 movies were also unrelated to violent crime and to homicides involving firearms."[21] And lest we forget, we are not the only country in the world that consumes violent media. There is no consistent correlation between countries that consume a lot of media and countries with high violent crime rates or gun deaths.

What About Evil, Evil Video Games?

If you read the news or watch television dramas about police work, you've heard the argument that video games are the cause of real-world violence. Politicians of every political persuasion are fond of blaming video games for violence, especially mass shootings. In 2019, following a particularly awful series of mass shootings, President Donald Trump called for stopping "the glorification of violence in our society," including "the gruesome and grisly video games that are now commonplace." House of Representatives Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy claimed that video games "dehumanize individuals" and implied that mass shooters mimic what they see in video games.[22] In 2011, Democrats in California led efforts to legally restrict the sale of some video games to minors—a law that was later found to be unconstitutional. James Densley, a criminal justice professor who studies the lives of mass shooters, argues that blaming video games for mass shootings has become "a script" for politicians. "The same old tropes keep getting revisited."[23] Indeed, the idea that young people are inspired by video games to go out and commit violent crimes is a regular feature of police procedural dramas on television. In 2013, the American Psychological Association established a Task Force on Violent Media to conduct a thorough review of research on the connection between violent video games and real world violence. The task force concluded that existing research "demonstrates a consistent relation between violent video game use and increases in aggressive behavior, aggressive cognitions, and aggressive affect and decreases in prosocial behavior, empathy, and sensitivity to aggression."[24] They recommended a new ratings system and increased education about video game research, and implied legal restrictions might need to be put in place.



▼ Three-quarter, profile view of a teenage, Caucasian boy, wearing a headset, sitting on a couch and playing a violent video game on a large flat screen television

Andrey Popov/Shutterstock

The APA's report, as well as its subsequent policy recommendations and public advocacy, generated a lot of controversy, both among the public and within academia. In 2020, a group of scholars sought to replicate the research done by the APA task force. They found many problems with the original research. Some of the studies originally included by the APA "appeared not to have sufficient data from which to extract meaningful effect sizes," and there were dozens of other studies that should have been included in the task force's work but were not.[25] The revised research found "weaker overall evidence for effects of violent video games on aggression," and ultimately concluded that the link between video games and aggression was "trivial and unimportant."[26]

This is in line with other, more recent research. A recent study on behavioral changes following the release of new violent games, for example, found no increase in actual violence, including cruel or mean behavior. The study actually showed that those playing new games were *less* likely to hurt someone badly, in part because they were spending so much time playing the game.[27]

Video games are incredibly popular, and their popularity is only growing over time. There are nearly 227 million players across all ages in the U.S.[28] Though the most common video games are casual games like Tetris and Solitaire, 39% of gamers play action games and shooter games.[29] As the number of people playing these more violent genres of games has grown, shouldn't we have seen an uptick in violence? In fact, crime rates seem to decrease in the days following the release of popular violent films and video games.[30] While there is no serious research contending that media violence reduces real world violence on the whole, it is possible that the release of new, popular violent content causes individuals who would otherwise be committing violent acts to stay at home for a few days when they would otherwise be out committing crimes. The percentage of women who play video games has skyrocketed in recent years, and now 45% of gamers in the U.S. are female.[31] And yet there has been no sudden increase in the number or percentage of women committing violent crimes. Furthermore, there is no global correlation between the popularity of violent video games and rates of violent crime.

What Do We Really Know?

Is there a way to resolve this disagreement between scholars? Is there a way to find the truth when experts in the field disagree so strongly as to how to interpret existing research? It would be a mistake to play down the opposition between particular scholars, especially when some of the arguments on various sides involve extensive critiques of the claims and approaches of individual researchers. This is one of those areas where there are genuine and fundamental differences in how even smart, well-informed people approach and interpret the same issue. If we focus only on the most strident voices, it might seem as though there is no fair way to summarize our knowledge about media violence. On the other hand, many observers and watchdog organizations have found ways to talk about the controversy in general without dismissing any of the major participants. **FactCheck.org**, a project run by the communication-focused Annenberg Public Policy Center, provides us with a representative summary of our current knowledge. They point out that "the majority of studies show that extensive exposure to media violence is a risk factor for aggressive thoughts, feelings and behaviors." However, "there's less consensus on whether media violence is a risk factor for criminal violence, which is a more serious form of aggression." Finally, "[t]he link between media violence and mass shootings is yet more tenuous. Compared with acts of aggression and violence, mass shootings are relatively rare events, which makes conducting conclusive research on them difficult."[32] This then, is what we know: consuming violent media content is one risk factor that increases the probability that some people may develop aggressive thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, but there is no consensus of experts about whether such consumption also causes violence, and there is no evidence that it leads to mass shootings.

Focus on Critical Thinking: What the Controversy Teaches Us

Although there is no scientific consensus about the relationship between media violence and real-world violence, we can still learn important lessons—not just from the research itself, but from the academic controversy surrounding that research. The first of these lessons is that the advancement of human knowledge can sometimes be restricted or even corrupted by the way the publication process itself works. For those of you not familiar with the academic process, there are many more scholars who want to publish research than there are well-regarded academic journals available to publish research. Individual scholars could theoretically decide to publish their research by themselves on the Internet, but there are multiple reasons they generally don't do so. First, the journal publication process includes something called **peer review**: literally the anonymous review of important research by peer scholars. In order to be published in an academic journal, a piece of research is usually given to multiple experts in the same field, who are then asked to review the work without knowing who the authors are. These experts then submit feedback and recommendations regarding publication to the editor, who then removes their names and passes their recommendations on to the authors. This process is regarded by many modern academics as an absolutely critical element of the scientific method because it means scholars must produce research that is persuasive to others who have the specific knowledge required to judge their work. As a result, publishing in academic journals that use peer review is generally considered the gold standard for scholars. They can choose to self-publish their own research or to publish in non-peer-reviewed journals, but they will receive considerably less professional recognition for doing so, and their universities will not see that kind of publication as sufficient grounds for promotion. Finally, peer reviewed journals tend to be the focus of the scholarly

community, and even of popular journalists who cover the world of scholarly research. Essentially, publication in well-regarded academic journals is how scholars make sure their work is disseminated to the broader world.

So, researchers want to publish in good journals, but there aren't enough journals to go around. Not only that, but good journals like to establish their credentials by turning down a certain percentage of the articles submitted to them—in essence, proving that they are highly selective. This means that there is a selection process in journals where reviewers and editors make choices about what research does and does not get published (and therefore disseminated to the world). While there are policies and procedures in place to help guide this process, in the end the decisions are still being made by humans, and we are all susceptible to psychological and ideological bias. When it comes to media violence research, one concern critics have long had involves the way humans tend to process and evaluate scientific findings. What happens when multiple studies about the same subject are submitted to journals? Each of these studies ask a similar question: is there a link between consumption of violent media and real world violence. Some studies show a strong link, others show none at all. Which of these studies ends up getting published? In theory, the only thing that should matter is the quality of the research and writing involved in the scholarship. However, research has documented something known as **publication bias** (or sometimes **dissemination bias**). At its most basic level, publication bias is the idea that humans tend to perceive research that establishes causal links as "better" than research that does not find such links. In the social sciences, publication bias tends to produce three related outcomes:

1. Studies that do not produce significant evidence of causal links tend to go unpublished.
2. Authors have a tendency to submit only research that demonstrates evidence of causal links
3. External (peer) reviewers tend to give more favorable reviews to studies that contain evidence of causal links.[33]

Publication bias creates a number of problems for anyone concerned with the advancement of human knowledge. First, it means that we are often denied access to research that *disproves* causal theories, so our understanding of the world is inaccurate. Second, publication bias creates "the illusion of theory confirmation, potentially leading to the continuation of programs or policies that are ineffective or, worse, harmful."[34] If policy makers think there is a scientific consensus when there really isn't, they are unlikely to be able to craft effective legislation or other policies. Recognizing the dangers of publication bias, many researchers and academic journals have taken steps to try to rectify the situation. However, there is still strong evidence of publication bias in media violence research (and in educational and psychological research as a whole), and "statistically significant research remains the norm in peer-reviewed, published research" in this area.[35]

A second lesson we can learn from the media violence controversy is that even scholars are not immune to the temptations of exaggeration and self-importance. When we write up the results of our research into academic articles, one of the first lessons we learn is to answer the "so what?" question. In other words, scholars need to explain why their research is important, and why their readers should care about it. Unfortunately, media violence scholars sometimes describe the importance of their research in ways that don't exactly match up with the nature of their findings. Markey and his team of researchers reviewed publications about media violence and discovered that some researchers used "sensationalistic language. . . in generalizing the findings of research conducted primarily in laboratories, with questionnaires, or by examining minor forms of aggression in relation to violent

crime."[36] Specifically, researchers whose findings were about aggression tended to describe the importance of their research by referencing violent crime. Markey found numerous instances where scholars framed their findings about aggression by describing specific instances of violent crime, especially mass shootings. These graphic descriptions of the horrors of violent crime were sometimes accompanied by references to some of the more extreme (and often disproven) claims in the literature about causal connections between violent media consumption and real-life violence. Markey and his team argued that this tendency to overhype the importance of research on aggression is dangerous:

> At best, this tactic confuses and distracts readers; at worst it exploits the tragedies and their victims. There is also the very real possibility that some scholars will start to believe these sensationalistic claims as true. For example, in a recent court case, one prominent violent media researcher, serving as a paid expert witness for the defense, argued that a 14-year-old victim of a horrific multiple murder may have actually been the perpetrator of the murder, in part because he liked to play the violent video game Mortal Kombat. Although this testimony did not sway the jury and Assistant Attorney General Michael Atterberry later said it was "The most offensive testimony I've heard in my life," it serves as a stark reminder that researchers can sometimes get caught up in the sensationalistic tone of their own claims.[37]

It is certainly misleading for scholars who are researching nonviolent changes in attitudes and behavior to link their research to violence. Furthermore, it is deeply unethical to suggest that any single media violence study can explain the complex of factors that produces individual acts of violence. As a result, "in 2013 approximately 230 media scholars, psychologists, and criminologists signed a statement to the American Psychological Association expressing their concern about the generalization of '. . . laboratory measures of aggression to public health issues and violent crime.'".[38]

A third, related lesson is that misunderstandings of academic research, whether accidental or intentional, can produce misleading statements and questionable policy stances by academic, professional, and political organizations. The American Psychology Association's News Media, Public Education and Public Policy Committee recently conducted a comprehensive review of policy statements about media effects by professional organizations. They found that "the majority overstated the evidence for harmful effects and ignored or downplayed controversies in the various research fields."[39] Policy statements about media effects contained many kinds of flaws, including citation bias, false consistency, lack of clarity and transparency, overgeneralization, exaggeration, insulation, and non-credible sources. These problems were particularly pronounced in statements about media violence. Every such statement studied by the committee had flaws in at least one of those areas, and eleven of the twelve statements had flaws in at least three different areas. Eight of the twelve statements had flaws in at least six of the seven areas. Why are so many statements about media effects so flawed? The committee suggested that administrators of professional organizations "feel under pressure by government agencies to provide *the answer* that would support public policy on a social issue."[40] Researchers and professional organizations who are willing to misrepresent the nature of the science on media are likely to be rewarded with political influence and public attention, skewing public discourse and policy in the same way that publication bias skews knowledge.

The final lesson we can learn from the controversy about media violence research is that focusing on questionable research agendas prevents us from exploring more important topics. There are only so many media scholars and research funds to go around, and as we have already discussed, publication space is limited. If we are really concerned with how to understand and prevent violent crime, why have scholars, professional organizations, and political actors focused so much on media violence? The causal connection between consuming violent media and committing violent crime is tenuous, and "[a]t aggregate levels, factors such as concentrated disadvantage, unemployment, population demographics, and the like may overwhelm individual-level factors in influencing violent crime rates."

Things like resource deprivation, ease of access to guns, and even temperature have all been established as causally linked to violent crime at a much higher rate and with much greater certainty than consumption of violent media. A recent analysis of interpersonal violence research reviewed over 1,000 individual studies from across 14 countries, surveying information from over 120,000 individuals. The study concluded that substance abuse was the most significant risk factor for violence, followed by various (rare) forms of mental illness.

So, should researchers just ignore possible effects of consuming violent media? Scholars have quite reasonably argued that it seems extremely unlikely that all this violent media has no effect at all on consumers. We are, as a species, exposed to vastly more violence than we used to be, even as the real-world violence around us decreases. That's something we ought to be investigating. However, because so much of the existing research has focused on violence, there is less research on the full range of possible effects. The rest of this chapter will attempt to remedy that situation, at least in part.



▲ Low-angle seated view of an angry manager shouting at his coworkers during a meeting in the office.

skynesher/Getty Images

Media Violence: Other Possible Effects

If we don't focus exclusively on the notion that consuming violent media makes one violence, many other possibilities open up. First, it is worth spending a moment talking about the importance of aggression. Because violent crime is so traumatic, and because it captures our imagination, we tend to downplay aggression as a possible media effect. While it is certainly true that real violence does more damage, it is also considerably less common than nonviolent but aggressive behaviors. Things like pushing, shoving, bullying, insulting, or even spreading gossip tear at the fabric of our connections with others, and significantly decrease the quality of our lives—and there is strong evidence that consuming violent media is a risk factor for that kind of behavior. Although many studies have argued that consumption of violent media reduces empathy in young people, more recent research suggests that what is really happening is a decrease in sympathy. In other words, "teens who consume media

violence subsequently feel less concern for other people in distress but do not necessarily share or understand the emotions of other people to a lesser degree."[41] Even so, that is a significant problem, as sympathy is strongly related a host of positive attitudes and behaviors.

In addition to aggression and loss of sympathy, there are other potential negative impacts of violent media consumption on young people. Many studies have revealed that "youth who watch more television are significantly more likely to suffer from a wide assortment of physical health issues" and that these problems may last throughout much of their lives.[42]

There is also substantial evidence that consuming scary media content creates fear in young people, and is "also associated with depressive symptoms and sleep disturbance."[43] A recent

study demonstrated that news coverage of traumatic events can cause some individuals to become more sensitive to future exposure to coverage of traumatic events. In other words, seeing news reporting of traumatic events can fuel a "cycle of distress" when sensitive individuals are exposed to future coverage of other traumatic events.[44] However, "Based on the first 25 years or so of research there is little to suggest that, at the group level, scary TV has a severe impact on children's mental health."[45] Even so, it's worth noting that there is a large base of research that suggests violent media doesn't turn us into offenders as much as it causes us mental distress.

Over the last fifty years of media effects research, many different possible impacts of violent media consumption have been proposed. Some of them have been supported by subsequent research, while others have gone out of favor. One of the most commonly discussed of these is **mean world syndrome**—an attitude, cultivated by violent media consumption, that the world is a more violent place than it really is, and that people are generally out for themselves. There has not been a consensus surrounding the "everyone is out for themselves" part of the theory, but there is ample evidence that something is wrong with the way Americans perceive violent crime. As has been mentioned, crime rates in the U.S. began a precipitous decline in the early 1990s. Until about 2001, public perception closely tracked this decline.

In other words, for around 10 years the public was accurately perceiving that crime was going down. Beginning around 2001, however, crime rates continued their steady decline but the percentage of the population who reported that crime was on the rise started to increase. Since 2001, violent crime has declined by about 20% compared to its highs of the early 1990s. However, the percentage of the population who *think* the crime rate is going up has increased from around 40% to around 70%.[46] This is called the **violent crime perception gap**, and it is the part of the mean world syndrome theory that seems to be the most likely to be true. In fact, researchers recently studied 38 years of television violence data and compared it to violent crime perceptions during that same period. They found that the amount of violence on television directly predicted the overall fear of crime.[47] This suggests that cultivation theory is right—at least to some degree—and that people are often taking their cues about the nature of the real world from the world that they see on television (and perhaps in other media). It is worth noting that perhaps the most under-studied aspect of violent media consumption is whether it can be linked to positive effects. One interesting piece of research concluded that audiences experience more enjoyment from violent forms of media than other forms, especially when "bad" characters were punished and "good" characters triumphed.[48] There are unquestionably reasons so many consumers choose violent media, and so far our research has not done a good job identifying and exploring these reasons.



▲ Close-up view of a scared woman looking through blinds.

D-Keine/Getty Images

One final idea to consider as you think critically about this controversy is that a focus on crime encourages us to pay attention to one kind of violence instead of others. While violent crime is horrible and traumatic for everyone who experiences it, it is far from being the largest cause of suffering and death. In fact, things like infectious disease, cancer, heart disease, diabetes, and traffic accidents regularly cause far more damage than criminal violence. Many of the largest causes of human suffering (both in the United States and globally) are strongly associated with poverty and other forms of economic disadvantage. It is tempting and often politically popular to blame violent media for our problems, but programs to promote equal access to social services, good jobs, and cheap health care would make much more of a difference in people's lives than anything we could do related to media consumption. Some critics argue that controversies like this encourage us to ignore the damage done by structural violence, while others argue that we need to pay attention to everything that might be making our society less healthy and more violent.

What to Study

KEY WORDS

Causality

Violence

Aggression

Methodologies

Peer review

Publication bias/Dissemination bias

Mean world syndrome

Violent crime perception gap

QUESTIONS YOU SHOULD BE ABLE TO ANSWER

- What are the statistics about the amount of violence on television currently? What is the trend in terms of the amount of violence on television and in other media? How can it be true that our overall consumption of violent media is on the rise when the relative amount of television violence has stayed stable over time?
- What is the nature of the disagreement between various scholars regarding the possibility of a link between consuming violent media and committing acts of violence in the real world?
- What do the most prominent statements in the academic and professional literature say about the possibility of a link between violent media consumption and real-world violence? Do those statements accurately reflect existing academic research?
- What does the definition of causality have to do with this controversy? What is the real nature of the causal link some research has shown between violent media consumption and violent behavior?
- What is the difference between violence and aggression, and what does that have to do with this controversy?
- What methodological problems do media researchers confront when trying to study violent behavior? What have their solutions to those problems been, and how does that impact the state of our knowledge?
- What has the trend been for the violent crime rate in the U.S. since the 1990s? What relationship has that crime rate had to the amount of violence in the media?
- What does research show about the link between video game playing and violence? What percentage of video game players in the U.S. are female? Why does that matter when it comes to a possible link

between video games and violence?

- What is the best summary of the overall state of our knowledge regarding possible connections between consumption of violent media, aggression, and violence?
- What are the four lessons we can learn from the media violence research controversy?
- Is there evidence of publication bias in the research about media violence? What problems does that create?
- What are some of the other possible non-violent effects of consuming violent media? What does it mean to say that research on violent media focuses our attention on one kind of violence but away from other kinds?

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Media & Race—Chapter 17

About This Chapter

The last two chapters of this book deal with two of the largest and most difficult media controversies of the modern age: the intersections of media, race, and gender. There are many challenges in confronting these issues, not the least of which is their tendency to interact and overlap. In 1989, legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term **intersectionality** to describe the fact that prior understandings of racial and gender-based discrimination inherently disadvantaged black women. Crenshaw argued that any understanding of discrimination needs to consider race and gender simultaneously.[1] In that spirit, it is best to view these last two chapters as one discussion—and you should not be surprised to find a great deal of intersectional subject matter here.

Furthermore, these two chapters differ substantially from the previous chapter on media and violence. While the popular focus on violent media research has been the potential for real world violence, the controversies surrounding media, race, and gender are much more varied. It is no exaggeration to say that there has been so much research and discussion of the confluence of media, race, and gender that we cannot possibly hope to summarize it here. Rather, these chapters will focus on introducing you to the most prominent and popular areas of the controversies, in the hope that you will be inspired to find your own way to the specific areas you find most interesting.

That brings us to the main topic of this chapter. Race can be a difficult subject to study because it represents what seems initially like a paradox. On the one hand, geneticists have clearly established that "race" as we use the term is not a scientific reality. The American Society of Human Genetics recently issued a statement on behalf of its 8,000 members declaring that "[a]lthough a person's genetics influences their phenotypic characteristics, and self-identified race might be influenced by physical appearance. . . race itself is a social construct."[2] At the same time, our perception of race and the social (and even legal) categories we have constructed around it have had a profound influence on human history, justifying a horrifying array of atrocities and discriminatory conduct and representations that continue to take place today. In truth, we often care a lot about things that are social constructs. There is no physical difference between the land on two sides of a national border, for example, but policies are made and wars are sometimes fought because of the imaginary lines separating nations. Perhaps this makes media literacy a fitting place to discuss race, since media content is composed of things that can be very important yet are often misrepresented or even fictional. As we proceed with this discussion, however, it is helpful to keep in mind that the differences in the way media treat humans based on perceived race does not reflect a scientific reality of human difference. Instead, media representations are part of what convinces us that genetic race exists in the first place. And media representations teach us to associate certain characteristics with different races.

This chapter will be divided into three sections: racial representations in the media in general, the intersection of race and news, and the relatively new field of research related to race and the Internet. This chapter is one big focus on critical thinking, since understanding the way

representations of race work in the media we consume is essential to becoming a critical consumer of those media. Once you understand that the media landscape is not some “natural” selection of people and representations, it is easier to understand why we must all view that landscape critically. What we see, what we hear, and what we read are all the result of human choices that are deeply influenced by centuries of racial thinking and racist practices.

WHAT TO FOCUS ON

Focus on the entire chapter, especially the key words, important people, and questions in the “What to Study” section at the end of the chapter.

Racial Representations in Media

Presence

The basis for most of the interrelated controversies around race and media is the substantial body of research about **representation** of minorities in the media—the way minorities are portrayed, described, and otherwise depicted in various media. For many years, this research has focused primarily on television as the most popular and therefore most influential mass medium. This research has consistently demonstrated that ethnic minorities have been under-represented in American entertainment television, and that white people have been over-represented. In other words, if we assume that the world of American television should ideally reflect the ethnic makeup of the United States, we would discover that there are far fewer people of color on television than there should be and far more white people. This is the most fundamental issue of representation: **presence**. Do members of different ethnic minorities get represented at all, and if so to what extent? Unfortunately, the popular debate about race in the U.S. often gets reduced to black-versus white, and if we only examine those two social categories we miss out on some of the most important issues of media representation.

Black Americans have historically been under-represented on television, but that story is complex. In her study of five decades of television representation, media scholar Nancy Signorielli discovered evidence of a roller-coaster of representation for Black people on television.[3] Before the 1970s, Black people were dramatically under-represented on television. However, in the 1970s and 1980s, representation began to rise dramatically, and by the 1990s the percentage of television characters who were Black roughly matched their percentage in the actual American population. At one point in the late 1990s or early 2001, there were more Black characters on television, proportionately, than in the general population. However, the trend toward more representation reversed, and there was a large decline in representation in the first decade of the 2000s. For the period of 2010–2020, things improved. At the beginning of the decade, very few television shows had majority non-white casts. By the end of the decade, around 30% of television shows had casts that were majority non-white.[4]



▼ Half-length view of a young Black woman holding a digital tablet and touching a heads up display of streaming images or videos

metamorworks/Shutterstock

For the 2019-2020 TV season, Black and multiracial actors were actually overrepresented compared to their share of the total population. When it comes to *lead* actors in television, the percentage of minority actors has grown steadily since 2010. In 2011, only about 5% of lead actors in scripted broadcast television shows were non-white. By the end of the decade that figure was 23%. This growth particularly benefitted Black actors. In the 2019–2020 television season, around 11% of lead actors were Black.[5] This is approaching proportional representation.

When it comes to film, the story is largely the same. Overall minority representation increased dramatically in movies during the 2010s. At the beginning of the decade, around 10% of movies had majority non-white casts. That number remained relatively consistent until the latter part of the decade, but then it rose dramatically. In 2021, 31% of films had majority non-white casts.[6] In 2021, 18% of all film roles were cast with Black actors, which is an over-representation compared to share of the overall population that is Black. Lead actors in movies are also becoming more diverse. In 2011, only 10.5% of lead actors were non-white, but by 2021 that figure was 38.9%—very close to proportional representation. In 2021, 15.5% of lead actors in movies were Black, which is slight over-representation. Given that racial minorities buy the most tickets for roughly 60% of the top grossing films, and films with diverse casts produce the highest box office receipts,[7] however, this is actually more in line with what we would expect in the industry. There is more to the story about Black representation on television than simple presence, however, and we will discuss that momentarily.

The large increases in Black presence in television and film have not, unfortunately, been replicated for other ethnic groups. Latin characters are by far the most underrepresented on television. “The 1950s is the only decade in which Latinos appeared on television at a rate consistent with their proportion in the actual population. During this period, 3% of all TV characters were Latinos,” while the overall percentage of the Latin people in the U.S. was around 2.4%.[8] As the Latin population in the U.S. grew over the years, however, their representation on television did not keep pace. And, unlike Black Americans, they have not risen to a state of near-parity. “According to the U.S. Census, in 2000 Latinos comprised over 12% of the American population, yet Latinos constituted a mere 1.5% of regular primetime characters in 1999–2001. By 2010, according to the Census data, Latinos made up over 16% of the U.S. population, but they comprised only 3.3% of the primetime characters in 2007–2009.”[9] The Latin population of the United States is now at 18.5%,[10] but only around 6% of television characters are Hispanic.[11] When it comes to lead roles on television, the overall numbers are even worse. Only about 5% of lead television roles are given to Hispanic actors. Latin characters are simply hardly ever present on American television, a deeply concerning issue given that the Latin population in the U.S. continues to increase, both in total numbers and as a percentage. Furthermore, only 7.7% of all film actors were Hispanic in 2021, and only 7.1% of lead film roles were given to Latin actors—and those figures represent significant increases from previous years.[12]

The news on representation is not much better for other ethnic minorities, and in some cases is even worse. Asian-American and Pacific Islanders make up just over 6% of the total population,[13] but only around 4% of television actors are AAPI. Lead television roles go to AAPI actors only about 2% of the time.[14] Things are significant better for Asian actors in movies. Around 6% of all movie roles go to AAPI actors, with 5.6% of lead roles going to Asian actors.[15]



▲ Waist-length view of a couple at a red carpet event, surrounded by fans taking photographs, and talking to a tv reporter

Exactostock/Superstock

These numbers have all significantly increased in the last decade. Native Americans represent 1.3% of the population,[16] but only 0.9% of all television actors are Native, and there are no Native American lead actors at all.[17] In movies, actors are Native American only 0.6% of the time, with only 0.4% being lead actors.[18] We don't have good data on the presence of other minority populations on television, though some attention is finally being given to South Asian people as a discrete category, and we are beginning to see more research on people of Middle Eastern descent. The problem with trying to do research on smaller minority groups has long been that there are simply so few representations that it is nearly impossible to find them.

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In keeping with the theme of intersectionality, the research conducted by psychology scholar Joanna Schug's team is interesting. They discovered that there is an intersectional component to representation issues in popular magazines. Across all genres, they found that Asians are more likely to be depicted as women, while Blacks are more likely to be men. This is consistent with the theory that race is also gendered in the U.S., with Asian people stereotyped as feminine and Black people stereotyped as masculine. They conclude that Black women and Asian men can often be rendered invisible in the media because they are perceived as not being representative of their race's "natural" gender.[19] Interestingly, in film and television, it is Latin and multi-racial groups that tend to be predominantly female, while white and Black actors are predominantly male. This sort of research illustrates how complex the mere question of presence can be for people of color, and it also demonstrates that racism and sexism often combine to produce uniquely discriminatory results for specific groups of people.

Quality

Questions of representation are not limited to presence. There is also a question regarding the **quality** of those representations. Even if a particular group has a strong presence in the media, exactly what is the nature of that presence? In other words, presence is a question of *if* a group is represented, while quality is a question of *how* they are represented. When it comes to quality, the news about representation of ethnic minorities is very bad indeed. For example, "research has shown that Blacks are less diversified because they appear most frequently in situation comedies and in programs with predominantly Black characters."[20]

In fact, Black characters are so strongly concentrated in sitcoms that many authors point to the declining popularity of the sitcom genre in the 2000s as the primary reason there were fewer black characters in general on television. Furthermore, research demonstrates that there is "a high degree of segregation for both White and Black characters in major/ leading roles, with large percentages of Blacks, particularly Black women, in programs (typically sitcoms) with mostly minority characters and most White characters found in programs with all White or mostly White characters."[21] This segregation has multiple negative impacts. Not only does the quality of representation on television suggest that racial groups should be (or "naturally" are) separated, confining Black characters to all-black shows has traditionally driven down the exposure Black actors get on television. Additionally, confining racial groups to particular genres of show has a tendency to reinforce stereotypes. When Black actors are seen as primarily comedic, this has the tendency to create associations between Black people and a lack of seriousness. This is made worse by the fact that the Black actors who are not in sitcoms tend to appear as criminals in mixed-race crime dramas, and that minority actors in general are rarely the lead talent in scripted shows.[22] While the quality of representation for Black actors has improved over time, it is still primarily stereotypical.



▲ Waist-up, selective focus, profile view of a young Asian woman wearing eyeglasses, sitting at a library study carrel, surrounded by books and working on a laptop computer.

Nattakit.K/Shutterstock

Latin actors are even more likely to find themselves stereotyped on television than Black actors. Research has determined that 77% of Latin characters appear on crime programs, and are mostly

associated with gangs and criminal activity.[23] Many decades of research have revealed a consistent pattern where Latin characters "are relegated to a fairly limited set of roles. . . which often revolve around themes of sexuality, criminality, subservience, or intellectual ineptitude."[24] Latin characters are thus dramatically under-represented in terms of presence and the quality of their representation is profoundly negative. Representations of Asian characters, on the other hand, are negative in a very different way. Most Asian actors on television are depicted as having comparatively high-status jobs, though they also tend to get cast in minor or non-recurring roles.[25] Extensive research and analysis over a long time-span has confirmed that Asian characters are commonly depicted as being part of a **model minority**—a group that is perceived to have greater success than other minorities and thus serves as a model for less successful groups. Unfortunately, that depiction is wrong on many levels. It assumes that all Asian people are a single group, and that their experiences as people of color and citizens of the United States are comparable to those of other ethnicities. Of course, the truth is that there have been multiple waves of Asian immigrants to the U.S. over time, and that these groups hail from a truly enormous geographic and cultural range. Furthermore, the story of these groups is not one of uniform success and freedom from discrimination. Indeed, sociologists Rosalind Chou and Joe Feagin argue:

> "[A]ll Asian American and Pacific Islander groups are racially subordinated by whites in the dominant U.S. racial hierarchy and in its associated racial framing. As each new immigrant group has arrived, they and their descendants have faced various forms of white-imposed economic exploitation and/or other substantial racial discrimination. . .. The discrimination in or exclusion from important white spaces they face daily has created a sense of shared experience and a racialized commonality."[26]

When Asian characters are depicted as a model minority, it suggests that Asian people of all backgrounds are both successful and completely assimilated into white culture. Model minority status can make it hard for non-Asians in the U.S. to believe that Asian people have problems, or that they hail from a diverse group of distinct cultures that can play a very important role in their lives. This situation pressures Asian people to identify with white culture and to distance themselves from their ethnic backgrounds, even while they face ongoing discrimination from whites.

Production



▲ Head-and-shoulders view of an African-American man using a video camera outdoors

Marc Romanelli/Blend Images LLC

Perhaps the most important aspect of representation in mass media—and one that gets very little attention—is the lack of minority representation in the production side of mass media. This includes a variety of different kinds of positions within the entertainment industry, all of which are influential in terms both of what stories get told and in terms of how they are told. Perhaps the most influential of these positions is that of writer. Unfortunately, in television, only around 26% of writer are non-white,[27] and past research leads us to believe that "those who write the stories may be likely to write about people with whom they are comfortable—presumably people like themselves."[28] One of the most comprehensive recent studies determined that two-thirds of all television shows did not have any Black writers at all, and only around 14% of all television writers are people of color.[29] The numbers for film were much worse throughout most of the 2010s, but have improved dramatically in the last few years. As of 2021, 32.3% of film writers were minority. This is still a dramatic under-representation, with Black, Latin, and Asian writers all under-represented compared to their overall share of the population.[30] In addition to writers, there is also substantial underrepresentation among television **showrunners**—the individuals who have overall creative authority and management responsibility for a single television show. More than 90% of major televisions shows have white showrunners, with only 5% of showrunners being black.[31] Only about 25% of television episodes in the 2019–2020 season had non-white directors, with minority female directors accounting for less than 10% of epsiodes.[32] Meanwhile, in film, a recent study examined 1,200 top films from 2007 to 2018 and found only 5% had Black directors, with only 3% Asian directors. Women of color were particularly under-represented as film directors, with less than .04% Black female directors and less than .03% Asian female directors.[33] Representations in film directing have improved in the last few years, with 30% of all films in 2021 having a non-white director.[34] Black and Latin directors in particular are still significantly under-represented, however, and "top films directed by people of color in 2021 were more likely than those with white directors to have the smallest budgets."[35] Data from the film industry suggests that "the industry may be relegating women directors and directors of color to women-themed and minority-themed projects, thereby limiting their opportunities in this critical employment arena."[36] There is significant under-representation of people of color in almost every aspect of the media production industry.



▲ Cheerful boy enjoying movie with mother

Klaus Vedfelt/Getty Images

Effects

An easy question to ask about all these numbers is "so what?" Obviously, we would prefer it if the media industry was more equitable in terms of who it hires, and it is always a concern when any industry shows signs of discrimination in its hiring practices, but we just had a whole chapter that questioned whether violent media content causes bad outcomes. In the end, are there larger, negative real-world consequences resulting from problems of racial under-representation in the media? The answer is yes. Unlike the media violence debate you just read about, questions of racial representation don't involve linking media content to specific, infrequent instances of real-world behavior like criminal violence. Instead, our concern is more about how media representations impact attitudes and general behaviors, and those are things media researchers are much better at investigating. Media psychology scholar Dana Mastro and her team summarized the research this way:

> [V]iewing depictions of racial/ethnic minorities on television is capable not only of distorting what information about these groups is known but also why certain groups should be viewed in these ways. Accordingly, the consequences of consuming negative, stereotypical content are argued to have far-reaching implications. Indeed, empirical evidence indicates that exposure to such depictions among white audiences prompts unfavorable views about blacks in society as well as unsympathetic positions on diversity-related policy issues such as affirmative action. More specifically, this research finds that consuming negative characterizations of blacks in the media leads to more unfavorable beliefs regarding criminality, intelligence, work ethic, socio-economic status, and values.[37]

As a result, current media depictions are causing real distress to young people of color. Research indicates, for example, that exposure to mass media "negatively influences Latino adolescents' self-esteem along a number of dimensions including social and appearance self-esteem."[38] This can lead to intense feelings of shame and anger. However, it appears that consuming media can improve attitudes about people of color, not just worsen them. Research has shown that when white people consume media that contains hyper-sexualized Black and Latin characters, white people develop more negative attitudes about those two groups. On the other hand, depictions of Black and Latin characters as

having higher social and professional status lead white Americans to hold more favorable views of those same groups.[39] The lesson we take from all this research is, unsurprisingly, that negative depictions of ethnic minorities lead to negative attitudes—even within the communities being stereotyped—and positive depictions can lead to positive outcomes.

News Media and Race

The news media suffers from many of the same race-oriented problems found in entertainment media, though of course with their own unique inflection. Like the research surrounding racial representations in entertainment media, the scholarly work that has been done about representations in the press spans many decades and is incredibly detailed. Unlike entertainment media, however where research has largely focused on natural divisions of content like "prime time television," the news media is so vast and diverse that researchers have tended to focus down on very specific geographic areas. There is too much to study, and it is hard to make the argument that what's happening in the news scene in a city like Los Angeles (or any other region) is generalizable to the entire nation. However, we can make a few conclusions based on the existing research.

Representation

Whereas entertainment media tends to suffer from problems of racial under-representation, the press has often had very different problems. In the news media, the problem can be both over-representation *and* under-representation, depending on which ethnic group we're discussing. For every minority group, however, there are problems with the quality of the representations being created. Research on traditional news media demonstrates that Black Americans are consistently over-represented, but only in specific ways. "The media consistently associates Blacks as being disproportionately indignant, violent, criminal, and uneducated, particularly in news stories about crime."[40] This takes many forms. In stories about crime, Black people are shown being criminals at much higher rates than in reality, while whites are under-represented proportional to their actual participation in crime. Multiple studies have demonstrated that the news media focuses on the relatively rare crimes where the suspect is Black and the victim is white, instead of on the much more common crimes that happen within racial groups. News reports also tend to treat the suspected criminals in their stories differently based on race. Almost twice as many white suspects are mentioned by name in news stories as Black suspects. "The result of this dehumanization is that viewers come to see Blacks as an undifferentiated group, while Whites are given individual identities."[41] When it comes to covering mass shootings, news reports tend to depict white shooters as suffering from mental illness, yet "the media disproportionately portrays racial and ethnic minorities as calculated criminals who commit the majority of mass shootings in the United States."[42] Similarly, Black Americans are over-represented in news reports about poverty. Roughly 22% of the poor people in the U.S. are Black, yet 66% of the poor people depicted in news reports are Black. On the other hand, 41% of the poor people in the U.S. are white, but only 17% of the poor people in news reports are white.[43] These kinds of findings regarding presence and quality have been replicated by many different studies over time, including recent studies that use cutting-edge computer analysis of visual and textual representations.[44]

While there is an enormous body of research dealing with racial representations in traditional print and broadcast media, not as much work has been done concerning the relatively new field of Internet news. However, the most comprehensive study performed to date produced results that very closely mirror what we know about traditional media. Media scholar Christopher Josey conducted an extensive review of Internet news sources, and found that every minority group is being misrepresented in crucial ways. For example, he found that Black Americans were not significantly under-represented

in Internet news stories, but stories about Black subjects "had significantly less neutral presentations and significantly more stereotypic portrayals." Specifically, Black people in Internet news were associated with welfare, crime, and poverty.[45] In fact, reports about Black Americans were the most imbalanced of any group he studied. On the other hand, Latin people are both under-represented and portrayed negatively in Internet news. Americans of Latin descent are "associated with undocumented immigration, crime, gangs, migrant work, and drugs" by Internet news stories.[46] Asian Americans are significantly under-represented in Internet news, though they are not as stereotyped as other minority groups. "However, it is worth noting that among all stereotypic portrayals seen for Asians as a group, most were associated with the field of science. Simply put. . . Asians, while portrayed as a model minority group, remain in a state of neglect, seldom seen in Internet news portrayals."[47] Arab Americans are actually over-represented in Internet news, but that is not good news. Josey found that Internet news representations are profoundly stereotyped, and that *all* of the stereotypical depictions of Arab Americans associated them with acts of terrorism.[48] Unsurprisingly, Josey also found that white Americans represent a majority of all the people in Internet news stories, and that they are significantly over-represented compared to their actual percentage of the population. Whites tend to be depicted either positively or in a neutral fashion. Josey concluded that white Americans "occupy a place of privilege within our media landscape, avoiding socially problematic associations, while seeing largely objective/neutral depictions within the mass media."[49] Again, it is worth repeating that all these findings are directly in line with what we already know about traditional news journalism, creating a consistent picture of problems with racial representation across all related mass mediums.

Production

Given the enormous, historic challenges with representation in the news media, it should come as no surprise that the journalism profession itself is marked by apparent discrimination against ethnic minorities. This is an old problem. "In 1979, the American Society of News Editors pledged that, by the year 2000, the percentage of racial and ethnic minorities in newsrooms would match that of the population at large. . . . Newspapers have failed spectacularly at achieving that goal. According to the Census Bureau, racial and ethnic minorities comprise almost 40 percent of the US population, yet they make up less than 17 percent of newsroom staff at print and online publications, and only 13 percent of newspaper leadership."[50] This disparity is, unsurprisingly, worst as the intersections, as "Hispanic, black and Asian women make up less than 5 percent of newsroom personnel at traditional print and online news publications" nationally.[51] When confronted about what the Columbia Journalism Review describes as "decades of failure" in diversifying newsrooms, owners and editors often make the argument that there simply aren't enough people of color getting journalism degrees. While is it certainly true that white Americans disproportionately benefit from the family wealth required to major in journalism and take unpaid internships in the industry, research also indicates that the problem isn't simply a lack of minority journalists. A study of graduating journalism majors found that people of color are significantly less likely to obtain full-time jobs in journalism. "Overall, only 49 percent of minority graduates that specialized in print or broadcasting found a full-time job, compared to 66 percent of white graduates."[52] This may help account for the fact that the overall percentage of black employees in newsrooms has stayed roughly at what it was in 1968.[53] There are a few signs that some aspects of the problem might be improving. The percentage of Latin news employees has doubled since 1995, and the percentage of Latin news directors has nearly doubled in that same

time.[54] Neither number is close to proportionate to the overall Latin population, however, and a recent study showed that only 18% of top news editors in the United States are non-white.[55] Until we begin to address the lack of presence for people of color in the production of journalism, it seems unlikely that we can truly solve problems with representation. This situation is of particular concern because studies show that "the identity of news producers (journalists, editors) has as significant effect on the visual representation of gender and ethnic groups."[56] In other words, the lack of diversity of newsroom personnel has a negative impact on how the news is reported and how those in the news are represented.



▼ Portrait of two TV news anchor people posing in the newsroom television studio

Blend Images/Alamy

Effects

As with entertainment media, research demonstrates that discrimination in news production and the subsequent disparities in racial representation have serious impacts. The problem is not that the news media contains stereotypes. Harmful impacts of news reporting arise "when stereotypes are negative and are used to create false perceptions of an entire race or group of people that others perceive as true. In particular, the way that the news media frames a story affects not only the stereotypes the viewer holds in their mind, but how those stereotypes are manifested in day-to-day behaviors. When the media frames a story in a way that upholds harmful and discriminatory stereotypes, there is a greater chance that the viewer will apply those to entire groups of people."[57] The idea that negative news reporting about racial minorities impacts the real-world attitudes and behaviors of those who consume that news has been supported by extensive research. This is true not just for overall attitudes toward a group, but for specific negative perceptions about particular groups that seem to derive directly from news stories about those groups. For example, we already know that the more crime news you watch, the more worried you are about the possibility of crime. However, research also demonstrates that "the more crime news you watch, the more likely you are to believe that Black suspects are guilty" but not that white suspects are guilty.[58]

Media scholar Travis Dixon's research on this question even controlled for attitudes about racism prior to the study, and his findings linking news consumption to subsequent racism remained strong no matter what his subjects claimed to think about racism in general. "This reaction was found even among respondents who condemned explicit racism, meaning that independent of one's prior racial attitudes, seeing Black men depicted as criminals in the news is positively connected with negative racial thoughts about all African Americans. Even people who are consciously sympathetic to Blacks can unconsciously stereotype Black men if they watch extensive amounts of TV news portraying Black male criminality."[59]

Other research has demonstrated that people who associate crime with Black Americans are more likely to support harsh criminal justice policies, meaning that negative news depiction of Black people is probably impacting laws we pass and the politicians we elect. The same thing is true of discriminatory news representations of mass shooters. When viewers believe that most mass shootings are committed by people of color (in fact, mass shooters are overwhelmingly white), their attitudes end up "misdirecting much of the necessary public discourse on the issue, and encouraging the creation of misguided public policies that can be harmful or ineffective."[60] Similar dynamics are at play when it comes to policy about poverty. Researchers have discovered that racial resentment, not income, is by far the best predictor of whether an individual is likely to support welfare and other forms of social safety net spending.[61] Perhaps the most shocking statistic is how many Americans have come to believe that literally all poor people in the U.S. are black. One survey found that over half of Americans believed this to be true, with an additional 20% who weren't sure.[62] The truth, of course, is that, even though Black people disproportionately suffer from poverty, there are around twice as many poor white people in the U.S. as there are poor black people. It's easy to see how this perception disadvantages both Black Americans—who are always assumed to be poor, and who are the subject of increased hostility as a result—and poor white Americans, whose economic struggles are erased by the fact that a significant percentage of the population believes that they literally do not exist.

What to Study

KEY WORDS

Intersectionality

Representation

Presence

Quality

Model minority

Showrunner

IMPORTANT PEOPLE

Kimberlé Crenshaw

QUESTIONS YOU SHOULD BE ABLE TO ANSWER

- What does intersectionality have to do with these controversies? What are some situations described in this chapter in which intersectionality seems to be at play?
- Is race genetically real? If not, why are we talking about it?
- Have Black Americans been proportionately represented on television over the years? Has that changed at all? How? Why did these changes occur?
- Roughly what percentage of roles in top movies go to Black actors? What about lead roles?
- How is Latin representation on television and movies? What about Asian representation? Is there an intersectional component to representation in entertainment television, and if so what is it?
- What are the statistics like for showrunners and directors in television and film? Is there a relationship between minority directors and film budgets? What does that relationship suggest?
- Are racial minorities stereotyped by their depiction in entertainment television and film? What are those stereotypes? What are the consequences of segregating minority actors within a small number of shows?
- Are people of color under-represented on the production side of television and movies? To what extent? Which groups are particularly poor represented? Is there an intersectional component to this?
- What does research tell us about the real-world effects of representation issues in entertainment media?
- How are various racial groups represented in the news media? Which groups are under-represented? What sort of racial stereotypes are the most common in the news media?
- Are people of color well represented as journalists and other news employees? What has been the trend in this area?
- What does research tell us about the real-world effects of representation issues in news media?

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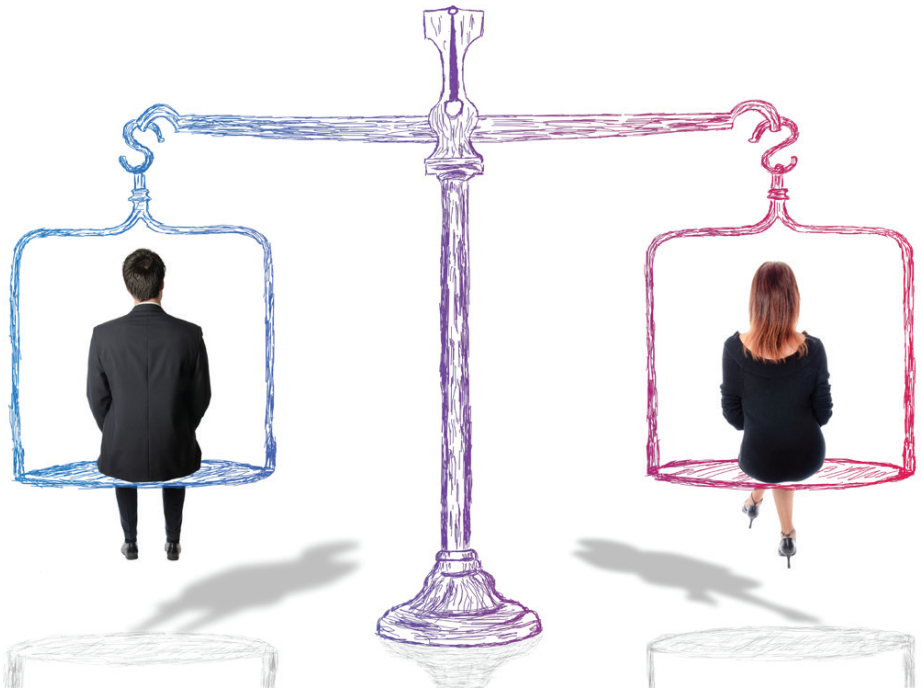
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Media & Gender—Chapter 18

About This Chapter

The final subject we will cover in this book concerns the multiple media-related controversies that we are grouping together under the title "Media and Gender." It's important for the purposes of this chapter to understand that the word "gender" is not the same as the word "sex" in this circumstance. The word **sex** refers to a person's biological characteristics, while **gender** refers to the social roles we have constructed (and which we continue to construct) based on perceived biological differences. Most scholars recognize that gender is performative—which is to say that gender represents a role that different people play out differently, and that our gender is therefore potentially fluid. Most of us are familiar with either freely choosing or being forced to choose to shift our behavior so the people in our lives perceive us as properly playing out our assigned gender. We might dress or act differently in different situations so others perceive us as "a real man" or a "real woman." And of course different people perform their genders differently. As parents, we watch our children experiment, trying to figure out how different gender performances work for them, and more often than not parents actively work to promote specific kinds of gender performances by their kids.

It is tempting to contrast the fluidity of gender with what we often perceive as the easy, binary, man-or-woman simplicity of biological gender. To do so, however, would be to misunderstand our knowledge of human genetics and biology. For a long time, doctors and geneticists have been aware that there are at least three categories of biological sex: male, female and intersex. As many as 1% of the population is now thought to be biologically intersex. "What's more, new technologies in DNA sequencing and cell biology are revealing that almost everyone is, to varying degrees, a patchwork of genetically distinct cells, some with a sex that might not match that of the rest of their body. Some studies even suggest that the sex of each cell drives its behaviour, through a complicated network of molecular interactions."[1] Increasingly, scientists are describing biological sex as a spectrum, one that involves "an intricate choreography of genetic and chemical factors that unfolds over time."[2]



▼ Conceptual image of equality, with photographs of the back view of a businessman and business-woman on a illustrated balance scale

thodonal88/Shutterstock

It is important to remember that the popular obsession with the "differences" between men and women is largely based on an ignorance of scientific research. There has been an enormous amount of research trying to document physical, psychological, and behavioral differences between the sexes, and it turns out that "most biobehavioral 'sex differences' actually reflect largely overlapping distributions with relatively small differences in average scores."[3] In other words, the biological/behavioral differences between people with different genetic sex markers are minimal, especially when examining things like brain structures and behavioral dissimilarities. In fact, "a recent comprehensive synthesis of 30-years of brain research found that *size not binary sex*, explains observed differences within and between groups of men and women Despite this, the concept of pervasive and immutable male and female difference continues to drive policies and practices, being used to justify interventions in sex and sports, same-sex educational programs, and even medicine."[4] We have spent (and continue to spend) so much of our time and energy as a culture insisting on the existence of sex and gender-based differences that are actually differences in brain size.

As we study the intersection of media and gender, keep in mind that media representations often reduce the dizzying complexity of biological sex and social gender to a pair of simplistic social roles. Even hard science research that investigates biological sex differences never produces findings that are entirely definitive. Instead, we talk about tendencies, and research indicates that we are too quick to confuse a tendency with an absolute. If women, for example, are overall shorter than men, that doesn't mean that all women are shorter than all men, yet we often make the unjustified inference that taller women and shorter men are somehow bad examples of their biological sex. Media representations risk this same kind of unjustified inference about sex and gender, but to a much greater degree. The point is that gender is not some sort of static,

universal, genetically simplistic characteristic, and that when media representations treat it that way they are constructing reality, rather than reflecting it. This chapter is one big focus on critical thinking. When it comes to gender/sex, it is essential for all of us to learn to be critical consumers of media. So much of what we watch, read, and listen to are representations of gender that simply do not reflect what real science teaches us about both biological sex and social gender. This chapter will deal with only several of the most prominent gender-related media controversies. As with race, there is an enormous body of fascinating research about media and gender, if you're interested in finding out more.

WHAT TO FOCUS ON

Focus on the entire chapter, especially the key words, important people, and questions in the "What to Study" section at the end of the chapter.

Gender Representations in Media

We will break this complicated discussion down into the same general categories we used to talk about media and race: presence, quality, production, and effect.

Presence

The under-representation of women in entertainment media is such a well-known historical phenomenon that it has almost passed into the realm of common knowledge. Women now make up almost 51% of the population of the United States, but for the first few decades of television's existence, they were comparatively rare. While the overall presence of women in entertainment media has improved over the years, it has not reached the level of parity we would expect if television actually reflected the demographic reality of the nation. In one of the most comprehensive recent studies of primetime television, media scholars Alexander Sink and Dana Mastro studied over 1,200 television characters from nearly 90 shows. They found that over 60% of the characters were male and just under 40% were female.[5] While there is widespread public perception that television representation has improved for women over the years, this breakdown is "nearly identical to the proportion" reported by a similar study in the late 1990s. "Thus, although the current television landscape has been lauded as a 'golden age' for women to due to perceived improvements in the prominence and power of female characters, the sheer numbers tell a somewhat different story, as women are underrepresented on both a comparative basis (vs. men on TV) and an absolute basis (vs. real-world Census data)."[6] There has been significant improvement in the number of women actors in television during the last decade, however. In the 2019–2020 television season, around 46% of actors were women, a significant improvement over the numbers in the middle of the decade. When it comes to lead roles, women have almost achieved representational parity. In 2019–2020, 48.8% of lead roles went to women. If you look at that statistic over the last 10 years, you'll see a lot of variation. Lead roles were almost equal at the beginning of the decade, then they went down to 35%, and now they're back at almost 50%.[7]

However, women on television tend to be given fewer speaking roles than men. In a study of the most recent data available, women comprised only 41% of all speaking roles on broadcast television. That number has remained disturbingly consistent for at least ten years—and in fact, has declined slightly over that period of time.[8] When women are depicted on television, they are consistently younger than their male counterparts. Over 60% of women on television are in their 20s and 30s, while over 50% of men are in their 30s and 40s.[9] The most common kind of television show—nearly 70% of the total number—is one in which the majority of the cast is male. Only 21% of television programs have mostly female casts.[10]

Things are worse for women's presence when it comes to film. Women made up only 35% of all speaking characters in the top-grossing movies of 2018, which is actually a high point for the last ten years.[11] The percentage of speaking roles for women has fluctuated between 28% and 33% during that time.[12] In 2021, women got only 42% of all movie roles, though they got over 47% of lead roles. That is an enormous improvement since the beginning of the 2010s, when only 25.6% of lead roles went to women.[13] The least-represented group of women in comparison to men in 2021 was white women, who got only 39% of the movie roles given to white people as a group. In spite of that lack of

representation, white women had more film roles in 2021 than all non-white women combined. Women of color have historically been under-represented in films, and this is especially true for lead roles. A recent study that examined 900 films over a 10-year span concluded that, among leads and co-leads in those films, only 3 were women of color.[14] There is some room for cautious optimism, however. Black women are finally getting more representation in films, with almost 5% of lead roles in 2021 going to Black women. Asian women often make large leaps in the statistics due to single movies like *Crazy Rich Asians*, though they are dramatically under-represented compared to their male counterparts. Latin women are also getting more roles in major films, though Hispanic movie actors are still represented at less than half their proportion of the total population. Women of color have unique representation issues in many different mediums, not just film and television. Although women of color make up 39% of the population of the U.S. (and much larger globally), only 29% of the cover photos for the top 48 fashion publications feature models who aren't white. Some publications are notably worse than others. British Vogue, for example, had only one model of color on their covers in 2016, and the publication has had only 6 solo cover models of color in the last 14 years.[15]



▲ Half-length, selective focus profile view of a female clapper loader using a clapperboard, marking the scene with costumed female and male actors against a green screen film set

Gorodenkoff/Shutterstock

As noted in the introduction to this chapter, gender representation is not only about the male/female binary. The status of trans people has received a tremendous amount of attention in the U.S. media in the last decade, though (as we will see) not all that attention has been positive. Still, "[a]cross broadcast, cable, and on-demand platforms, the amount of television programming featuring lead or supporting transgender characters is on the rise across all classifications, including scripted, reality, made-for-television movies, and documentaries."[16] However, when you examine the issue of transgender presence more carefully these numbers are not quite as positive as they might seem. "Even in programs that are celebrated for being about and featuring transgender characters, including those with main and supporting characters, transgender people get an average of 7% of the screen time. Furthermore, while the primary narrator of transgender stories is less likely to be a cisgender person, the voice remains that primarily of trans women," meaning that trans men and nonbinary people are hardly ever represented in the media at all.[17] And, of course, the mere fact of representation—presence – doesn't guarantee the quality of those representations. In film, things are not good at all for

transgender characters. From 2016 to 2020, no transgender or non-binary characters were depicted in any of the movies released by the major studios.[18]

Quality

As with presence, the quality of depictions of women in media has been poor for so long that it's a common part of our understanding of mass communication. Perhaps the most famous example of this sort of common knowledge realization that the media does a bad job representing women is the **Bechdel Test**. This test was originated as a comedic observation by cartoonist **Alison Bechdel**, and was originally applied to movies. In order to pass the Bechdel Test, a movie has to meet three conditions:

1. The movie has to have at least two women in it (with names)
2. These women must at some point speak to each other
3. They must have at least one conversation about something other than a man

The Bechdel test is admittedly an incredibly low bar for any movie to pass, and no one seriously suggests that passing it qualifies a movie (or any other media content) as having good representations of women. At the same time, it is shocking and sad how many movies do not pass even this simple test for female representation. A recent study of 350 top-grossing movies over a four year period determined that 40% of the movies did not pass the Bechdel test. However, every movie that made more than $1 billion during that time did pass the test.[19] This provides some evidence for the contention that movies achieve mass popularity more easily if they make at least some effort toward gender diversity. However, it's important to understand that the Bechdel test was devised as comedy, and was never intended as a serious analysis of representation. Many scholars have identified problems with using the test as a guide. Movies can be graded as passing because of a single line of dialogue, and the test tells us nothing about the specific identities of the women speaking, "thus ignoring the silencing of women of colour, women of certain ages, and those for whom English is not a first language."[20] So, in order to understand the quality of various gender depictions in media, we'll have to consult other sources.

Fortunately, there is a long history of research investigating gender-based depictions in various media. Women in television, film, and other media have historically been subject to a number of stereotypical portrayals. Women have been depicted as submissive, hyper-sexualized, and exclusively associated with domestic life. As a result, women have been much less likely to be shown as employed, and even more rarely in positions of influence or authority. These findings have all been replicated by many different studies. Women of color have been especially subjected to this kind of depiction. Black women in particular have been depicted in varying modes of hypersexualization, criminality, violence, and animalism, and masculinity.[21] One of the less discussed aspects of gender representation issues is how men are represented in media, though this is finally receiving more attention. Research demonstrates that depictions of men tend to fall within the fair narrow confines of what is known as **hegemonic masculinity**. "Hegemonic masculinity is the embodiment of traditional and stereotypical masculine norms and values, illustrated by characteristics such as aggression, power and dominance, status seeking, emotional restraint, heterosexuality, and risk taking."[22] Just as structural sexism in mass media denies women access to roles and representations outside traditional, sexist belief systems, so men are also confined to roles that force them to perform a narrow understanding of masculinity. The results are more economically beneficial for men, who receive an outsized share of roles, influence,

and profits, but their representations are nevertheless constrained by the same system that excludes and demeans women.

Recent research indicates some changes in gendered representations, but it also provides evidence that stereotypes are still far too common. Men on television are still portrayed as more dominant "in all measured domains."[23] That means men are depicted as "significantly more verbally aggressive, physically aggressive, more likely to bully than women, and more dominant in interactions."[24] This replicates research from the 1970s and 1980s, indicating that this is a stereotype that has persisted for many decades. One interesting development has occurred in the area of characters' sexuality, and it reflects the complex nature of media representations:

> Consistent with previous quantitative content analyses of primetime television, this examination revealed that the hypersexualization and hyperfeminization of women on TV appears to remain a staple in this content. These results are perhaps unsurprising, given commonly held notions that women should be "extreme physical specimens, visions of beauty, objects of men's heterosexual fantasies." Yet this makes the current study's finding that men were more likely to be objectified than women on primetime television even more curious. Perhaps this reflects recent trends, colloquially known as "hunkvertising," in which men are the targets of sexual objectification in advertisements. The tendency for the media to eroticize men has been noted in quantitative content analyses but still pales in comparison to the documentation of the sexualization of women in the media.[25]

In film, the situation for women's representation is arguably much worse. Hypersexualization is rampant, with women five times more likely to be shown wearing sexy attire than men, and nearly three times more likely to appear nude.[26] In addition to the Bechdel test, many other experts have developed their own measures for female representation in film, and the results are not encouraging. Some interesting examples are the **Koeze-Dottle Test**, which requires that 50% of a movie's supporting cast be female, and the **Waithe Test**, which requires that a movie have at least one black woman who is in a position of power and who is in a healthy relationship. Of the top 50 films of 2016, only 17 passed the Koeze-Dottle Test, and only 5 passed the Waithe Test.[27]

Depictions of trans people in media are complex, and often cause for concern. One recent study concluded that on "the rare occasion transgender people made it to the small screen, depictions were more often than not based on negative stereotypes functioning in a way to ridicule this community via humor, disgust, fear, alienation, and anger."[28] However, another study pointed out that, in addition to common negative representations, "more positive or constructive media representation also exists . . . particularly in movies. Such characterizations depict more sympathetic or emphatic characters and may inform people of the possibilities for medical treatment and support or educate the public about the violence and other social barriers transgender people experience."[29] Perhaps the most interesting research about trans representations engaged young trans people who consume media in order to gauge their perceptions of the media. Although this audience "indicated transphobia was rampant, and that the media shows few authentic representations of transgender people," they "also discussed many representations that they perceived as more positive, diverse, accessible, integrated, and representative, and that were less tokenistic or menacing."[30] Young trans people specifically pointed to online media as a good source of positive representations and realistic role models, in spite of the explicit transphobia present in some parts of the online media sphere.

Production



▼ Seated view of a TV director talking to her vision mixer in a production control room (PCR), a male colleague working behind them

Shutterstock/antb

On the production side, women are facing similar but slightly different situations depending on which medium they work in. More and more women are involved behind the scenes in television. 20 of *The Hollywood Reporter*'s 50 most powerful showrunners of 2021 were women,[31] and the industry press is full of news of female showrunners on the rise. In the 2019–2020 television season, women made up around 42% of television writers, and around 32% of television directors.[32] These numbers have been relatively stagnant over the last ten years, but we are in the midst of an unprecedented expansion in the amount of original television programming on television, so on the whole more women are working in TV production. These numbers are still far below parity, given overall population statistics, but they are better than what we see in film production. Of the top 250 grossing domestic films of 2015–2016, women represented only 17 percent of all directors, writers, producers, executive producers, editors and cinematographers, combined.[33] The situation is particularly bad for female directors. In 900 movies studied over a decade, only 4.1% of directors were women.[34] While the percentage of women working behind the scenes rose to 20% in 2018, that figure is less than one percent higher than it was in 2001, suggesting that women's off-screen fortunes in Hollywood did not improve.[35] There may be some hope for the future, however. At the end of the 2010s, the percentage of both female writers and directors rose significantly. 33.5% of movie writers in 2021 were female, while 21.8% of movie directors were female.[36] Even so, these statistics are nowhere near representational parity, and the rise in female participation behind the scenes has yet to prove its durability. Furthermore, there is a strong tendency for films directed by women to receive fewer resources. "72.6 percent of the films directed by women in 2021 had budgets smaller than $20 million, compared to just 53.1 percent of the films helmed by men. Men were also nearly twice as likely as women in 2021 to direct films with budgets in excess of $100 million (10.5 percent versus 5.9 percent).[37]

Effects

Research has documented a number of different gender-related effects that occur as a result of consuming entertainment media. Perhaps the most interesting of these has to do with the production side of these media. We just finished discussing the under-representation of women in both film and television behind the scenes. It turns out that this lack of representation has an impact that isn't related to audience consumption, but to the entertainment industry itself. Essentially, researchers have demonstrated that there is a connection between having women in positions of authority on the production side of media and other important things regarding representation. First, there is an impact on casting. "On top-grossing Hollywood films, movies with a female producer, writer, and/or director were associated with a greater number of female actors compared to films with only male producers, writers, and directors."[38] This same dynamic has been documented in television. Broadly speaking, it seems that having women in charge behind the scenes makes it more likely that women will be hired in both acting and production-related roles. This is an important counterpoint to the often-repeated claim that women don't support each other. Furthermore, research indicates that "the presence of women in behind-the-scenes positions of control" results in "more major female characters and female characters who were more multi-dimensional, appeared on screen longer, spoke more often, interrupted others more, and had the last word more frequently."[39] This is strong evidence that the presence of women in influential production roles leads to better representation of women on the screen.

For decades scholars have been producing research that links consumption of entertainment media to real-world attitudes and beliefs. Multiple different theories have been developed to explain these effects, but perhaps the most basic idea is that because "the sheer quantity of images of a group in the media (e.g., racial/ethnic group, gender, etc.) conveys a message about its relative value and strength in society, presence in the media is meaningful. If a group is relatively absent or underrepresented in the media, the implicit message is that this group cannot succeed and does not have a place in society."[40] That sort of impact is hard to measure, but the research we do have suggests other, more concrete forms of gender-related outcomes are related to media consumption. It is important to understand that none of our research claims that consuming media, by itself, entirely determines our attitudes about gender. Rather—as with media violence—consuming sexist media representations is one of several factors that can increase the likelihood that some people will form negative attitudes. That having been said, scholars have linked media consumption with a wide range of negative outcomes, including:

1. Acceptance of beliefs regarding hypermasculinity among college men

2. Tolerance of sexual harassment and violence
3. Acceptance of dysfunctional relationship beliefs
4. Hampering women's educational and vocational aspirations[41]

The first two of these impacts is particularly interesting. Most of the early research that was done on gender-related media effects focused on the impact media consumption has on women. Increasingly, scholars are also focusing on how men are affected by media. One study, for example, determined that media containing specific kinds of representations of masculinity not only have a general impact on men who consume it, but that consuming such media makes men more likely to develop a personal adherence to the norms of hegemonic masculinity.[42] Research leads us to believe that media consumption impacts men and women, though it often does so differently. Sexist media has "the potential to constrain women physically, socially, and professionally, but it may also create numerous challenges to male social and psychological development ranging from imitation on one end of the

spectrum to insecurity on the other."[43] In other words, there are multiple persuasive reasons to work toward equality of representation.

The research on trans-related media effects is not as extensive, in part because scholars only recently began focusing on trans issues. However, emerging scholarship surrounding trans representation is exploring multiple questions related to media consumption. There is growing reason to believe that media consumption is particularly important to trans youths. "Offline media is frequently the medium by which people who come to identify as transgender first encounter representation of transgender individuals and communities." And as a result, "the negative depictions frequently portrayed in offline media may have detrimental impacts, such as depression or shame, on transgender people who consume them."[44] There is additional cause for concern that negative representations of trans people in the media may provoke harassment and even assault. This research has not been done in the U.S., but "A recent study of transgender individuals and media in the United Kingdom found participants frequently experienced victimization as a result of popular media representation of transgender people. More than 20% of respondents reported experiencing verbal harassment, and 8% reported experiencing physical harassment stemming from negative media representation."[45] On a more positive note, scholars are beginning to believe that better representations of trans people and issue in the media could prove beneficial:

> Representing the full range of diverse transgender identities and a community of transgender people could play an important role in challenging stereotypes, increasing social acceptance and personal safety, and providing resilient role models for transgender youth and adults. Such programming could also signal to television producers that there are audiences ready for a new transgender narrative and provide cisgender audiences in particular with rich opportunities to question deeply embedded social assumptions about the gender binary and gender stability. Recurring lead and supporting characters allow audiences to develop parasocial relationships with them as the television narrative unfolds over time. Featuring transgender characters in such roles could play an important part in demystifying transgender identity for cisgender audiences and allowing them to relate to such characters on a deeper level.[46]

Though it is best to remain skeptical of the transformational power of mass media to resolve difficult social conflicts and stereotypes, the logic that positive representations can lead to positive attitudes and better behavior is confirmed by existing research on media effects in other areas.

News Media and Gender

Representation

Questions of gendered representation in news are so numerous and so complicated that it is difficult to summarize the research relating to them. However, over the course of many decades of research, a number of trends have emerged. Journalists tend to cover women less frequently than men, and when they do cover women their coverage tends to be more negative or misleading in a number of ways. As with entertainment media, the news media is more likely to describe women as passive or submissive, to downplay or ignore their careers and accomplishments, and to focus on their sexuality. Additionally, "women are disproportionally portrayed in family roles, such as housewife, spouse, or parent, or in soft professions such as education and health. In contrast, men are portrayed in hard professions, such as business and law."[47] Many scholars have described the news media's obsession with women's bodily appearance, regardless of the woman in question or the relevance of the story to such concerns. In other words, "women are portrayed through a narrow repertoire of gendered frames which are more or less constant and consistent in their stereotypicality. Whether the women in question are mothers or motorists, prostitutes or politicians, in all cases they are first framed by their biological sex, then by their behavior, and only then (and only if it is absolutely necessary to the story) by their professional occupation."[48] This narrow framing of women in the news can result in decidedly negative reporting. Many studies, for example, have revealed that journalists often report about sexual assault and rape in a such a way as to blame the victim and reduce the culpability of the suspect. One recent study found that 40% of reports about sexual assault on college campuses included language that cast doubt on victims' statements. Furthermore, reporters often focused on the perpetrators' accomplishments, which risks generating unjustified sympathy for them, framing the assault in a ways that emphasizes what the perpetrator lost, not how the victim was impacted.[49]



▲ Three 30–35 year-old multi-ethnic news reporters and TV cameraman interviewing a mature 60–65 year-old Caucasian man in the city

Exactostock/Superstock

Women who are running for office are particularly vulnerable to the news media's preferred framing of anyone female. Media and gender scholar Karen Ross argues that the typical frames journalists use to report about women in any situation have been translated into more specific frames they rely on when reporting on electoral candidates. "The kinds of frames which routinely describe women politicians and candidates include political incompetence, political naïveté, insufficient political experience, lack of leadership skills, excessive emotionality, and, most importantly, being *not men*."

Thus, female candidate begin with a substantial disadvantage when it comes to news coverage, "regardless of their actual experience, their actual track record, their actual leadership."[50]



▼ San Francisco, California, USA. 3rd June, 2007. San Francisco District Attorney KAMALA HARRIS kicks off her re-election campaign at the Women's Building. Credit: Eric Slomanson/ZUMA Wire/Alamy Live News Date Taken: 20070603

Eric Slomanson/ZUMA Press, Inc./ Alamy Stock Photo

This disadvantage can express itself in ways that are both obvious and subtle. In some cases, female candidates are simply covered less often or with a tone of skepticism that is not applied to male politicians. In other cases, the angles reporters choose to take when covering female politicians can make a difference. Politics scholar Jennifer Lucas notes that coverage of female candidates often stereotypically links them to gendered issues such as reproductive rights or domestic violence. "While this is likely because of their perceived credibility on these issues, this stereotyping in effect pigeonholes . . . female legislators, which can 'deny them credit for the breadth of their interests, efforts, and accomplishments,' reinforcing the ideas among voters that their identity is central to all of their work and that they do not have the same range of expertise and interests as their white, male colleagues, while also ignoring the latter's engagement on these issues."[51]

Recent research has demonstrated that sexist news coverage has an impact not only on how voters might view female candidates, but on whether women choose to run for office at all. "[W]omen consuming media in societies across the globe are exposed indirectly to the sexism targeted at those represented in media; thereby, traditional gender roles are reinforced, which dissuades women from seeing themselves as equally suited to politics."[52]

When it comes to news coverage of trans people and trans issues, research is less plentiful but still helpful. The picture that emerges in multiple studies is of reporting that can only be described as transphobic. Reporters "consistently misname and misgender transgender individuals, misrepresent transgender identity, portray transgender individuals as 'tricksters' who live out their gender to seduce heterosexuals, and sexualize the transgender body."[53] A recent study of the coverage of murdered transgender women of color found that news media delegitimized the victims' existence. Trans women of color were misgendered, portrayed as criminals, sexualized, and ignored when they were victims of violence.[54] The most significant finding of a recent comprehensive review of the most circulated daily

newspapers in the U.S. was that very little reporting about trans issues actually occurs. Over a ten-year span of coverage in 13 newspapers, less than 300 articles discussed transgender issues and individuals.[55] As with entertainment media, the news media has a strong tendency to ignore trans men and nonbinary individuals in favor of an almost exclusive focus on transwomen. The news media is still only in its infancy when it comes to coverage of trans people and issues.

Production

The lack of female representation in the news media is best reflected not by issues of representation, but by the absence of women in the production of news itself. Focusing on news production reveals a significant gender-based gap and much larger gaps at the intersections.



▲ Waist-length side view of a university student looking at various screens while using tv studio equipment.

TommL/Getty Images

In 2018, around 40% of all journalists (including leaders at news organizations) were women. This statistic is cause enough for concern, given the fact that women represent more than 50% of the overall population. However, all women of color were represented at shockingly low levels. Black women represented less than 2.7% of all journalists, as did Latin (2.4%) and Asian women. (2.5%).[56] Overall, only around 9% of journalists were women of color. Women do tend to be more strongly represented at online-only sites than at newspapers, and there is an increase in female presence on the editorial staff of newspapers.[57] Women are particularly under-represented in certain areas of reporting, however. Less than 13% of sports columnists are women,[58] and only 28% of TV news show analysts are female.[59] Scholars are also creating new ways to study gender-based representation in online news. In a massive study of pictures nearly 900,000 web-based news articles, researchers found that four times as many men are pictured in stories about politics and markets, while three times as many men are pictured in articles about sports, crime, and business.[60] This sort of data bridges issues of production and representation, helping us focus in on the subject areas where journalism is trending

away from equality. Unfortunately, the subject areas where female equality is at its worst are critical to the most central functions of journalism in our society.

Some targeted research has revealed that women are also being excluded from journalistic production in subject areas where their presence and perspectives would seem to be especially important. In a study of news articles and opinion pieces about reproductive rights and related issues in the nation's 12 most widely circulated newspapers and news wires, women wrote only 37% of the bylined stories.[61] This gap in reporting had consequences beyond a simple lack of equality. In the articles studied for this research, "[w]omen journalists quoted women more often than their male counterparts. Women journalists relied on female sources in 42 percent of quotes and male sources in 36 percent of quotes. Men journalists quoted women sources in just 27 percent of quotes while 48 percent of the quotes were from men sources."[62] Given that women are disproportionately impacted by issues of reproductive rights, the twin gaps of presence in production and content-based representation represent missed opportunities for consumers in search of relevant information from their news sources. This same kind of dynamic takes place in other areas as well. Male reporters are more likely to be assigned to cover cases of sexual assault. In a recent study, women wrote 31% of those stories, while men wrote 55% (the remaining stories were indeterminate or did not contain a byline). "Just 28 percent of the quotes in stories by men were sourced from women (and 54 percent were from men), while in the women-authored stories, 42 percent of quotes were attributed to women (and 38 percent to men)."[63] As noted previously, women already suffer politically from being exclusively associated with issues like reproduction and sexual assault. If female journalists are also prevented from reporting about those issues, there seems to be little hope for greater participation by women in other areas of the news.

Effects

Research has consistently demonstrated over many decades that women are both under-represented in the news media and that representations of women in the news are heavily stereotyped. This creates a situation that is often described as **symbolic annihilation**—a phrase that means a group of people has been eliminated from the media, both in the sense that they are not present and in the sense that their lived reality is not being accurately represented. Symbolic annihilation has been used to describe the situation of not only women in the media, but also various racial minority groups, LGBTQ populations, and others. In the case of the symbolic annihilation of women in the news media, one of the most obvious impacts is that consumers are encouraged to adopt a distorted, inaccurate view of women's presence, roles, behavior, and perspectives. Although this outcome is common for all forms of media exclusion, it is particularly dangerous in the news media. Unlike, say, entertainment media, the news describes itself as a purveyor of reliable and more or less objective content. Scholars refer to this as the **lie of authenticity**, the contradiction between journalism's claim to provide a fair view of the world when in fact it is most often providing a *male* view of the world. There are multiple negative consequences of this lie for women. Not only are women (especially young women) encouraged to internalize gender roles that are not in their best interest, they can also become discouraged from engaging in aspects of social life (such as politics, sports, business, and so on) from which the news media has excluded them.[64] Extensive global research has demonstrated, for example, that women's political ambition is suppressed in part because of the lack of positive news coverage of female candidates. A great deal of research over many years also supports the notion that exposure to news media generally promotes negative self-esteem in women. There is also a question of opportunity cost

in the sexism of news production. By being excluded from journalistic activities—especially activities like participation on television news shows—women are also denied the same opportunities afforded to men to influence public opinion and to advocate for their policy preferences and their perspective on the world. The entire population suffers form news content that represents only on gender perspective —especially because that perspective reflects a narrow, extreme version of that perspective.

What to Study

KEY WORDS

Sex

Gender

Bechdel Test

Hegemonic masculinity

Koeze-Dottle Test

Waithe Test

Symbolic annihilation

Lie of authenticity

IMPORTANT PEOPLE

Alison Bechdel

QUESTIONS YOU SHOULD BE ABLE TO ANSWER

- What is the difference between sex and gender? What does it mean to say that gender is performative?
- Is gender scientifically binary? What does it mean to say that gender is a spectrum, and what evidence is there for that claim? What does scientific research say about gender differences, especially in brain structure and behavior?
- Roughly what percentage of the characters on TV are male and female? Does this represent a change over the last 30 years, and if so in what direction? What is the gender breakdown of speaking roles on TV, does that seem to be changing?
- Roughly what percentage of speaking roles in films go to women? What about major roles? Lead roles? What about women of color?
- What is the trend for trans representation in entertainment media? What groups are being excluded in that trend?
- Roughly what percentage of top movies pass the Bechdel Test? What about recent movies that made more than $1 billion? Why is the Bechdel Test not a good tool, and what are some of the alternatives?
- How are women portrayed in entertainment media? What are the most common stereotypes? How are men represented, and what are the impacts of that?

- What does research tell us about which gender is currently more likely to be objectified? Where is hypersexualization worse for women, TV or film? How are trans people represented, and are those representations generally better or worse online?
- Roughly what percentage of behind-the-scenes production jobs in TV go to women? What about in film? Roughly what percentage of movie writers and directors are women? What are the trends in film production representation for women?
- What is the relationship between having women working in authority behind the scenes and overall female employment in movies? What is the impact on on-screen representation?
- Why is quantity of representation important? What are the four primary gender-related effects of entertainment consumption? Why is representation so important to trans youths, and what are some of the impacts of consumption of negative trans representations?
- How are women represented by the news media? What things tend to be the focus of that representation? In what ways are female political candidates impacted by this? What about news coverage of trans people and issues?
- Roughly what percentage of all journalists are women? What about women of color? What percentage of news stories about reproductive issues get written by women? What percentage of stories about sexual assault? What impact does the gender imbalance in these two areas have on the stories that get written?
- What are some of the negative impacts women suffer as a result of their under-representation is news media?

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Glossary

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